AMERICAN LABOR IN MIDPASSAGE

BERT COCHRAN, Editor

MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS
New York 1959

Copyright © 1959 by Bert Cochran
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 59-7878

Manufactured in the United States of America

357

CONTRIBUTORS

Dennis Anderson is the pen name of a staff official of an AFL-CIO union.

Harry Braverman is an editor of the *American Socialist.*

Bert Cochran is an editor of the *American Socialist.*

Douglas F. Dowd is Associate Professor of Economics at Cornell University.

William Glazier is Administrative Assistant to the President of the West Coast International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.

David Herreshoff is a Carnegie Fellow at the University of Minnesota and a contributing editor of the *American Socialist.*

Leo Huberman is co-editor of *Monthly Review.*

Shubel Morgan is the pen name of a white Southern writer who is now on the staff of an AFL-CIO union.

Nancy Reeves is a member of the New York and California Bars. She is now working on a book on women in America.

Harvey Swados is a novelist, whose latest book, *On the Line,* deals with auto workers. He writes for the *Nation* and other periodicals.

Paul M. Sweezy is co-editor of *Monthly Review.*

CONTENTS

Foreword ix

American Labor In Midpassage 1
BY BERT COCHRAN

The Condition Of The Working Class 65
BY PAUL M. SWEEZY

A Note On Cultural Exploitation 75
BY HARVEY SWADOS

No More Class War? 83
BY LEO HUBERMAN

Labor And Politics 99
BY HARRY BRAVERMAN

The Automation Problem 113
BY WILLIAM GLAZIER

The White Collar Worker 125
BY DOUGLAS F. DOWD

Women At Work 133
BY NANCY REEVES

The Negro And The Union 144
BY SHUBEL MORGAN

Corruption And Racketeering 150
BY DENNIS ANDERSON

Books About American Labor 165
BY DAVID HERRESHOFF

The Taft-Hartley Decade 177
BY BERT COCHRAN

Index 193

FOREWORD

THE post-World War II witch hunt has broken the tie of radicalism to the trade union movement. The consequences have been unfortunate for both sides. The unions have slid back into stultifying business unionism with the atmosphere of conformity becoming no less forbidding inside their organizations than in the society at large. And radicalism, deprived of one of its most important sources of strength, has been withering on the vine.

It will do no good simply to write off the labor unions, as some have been wont to do in recent years, and say that because of their dolorous record on the witch hunt, or cold war, or civil liberties, they are hopeless so far as providing dependable support for the pursuit of large social objectives in our society. If a meaningful movement for social advance is to be reintroduced into American public life, it can only be done by establishing a community of thought with at least some sections of the labor movement. A number of trade unions have given strong support to movements of the Left in past periods of American history and they will do so again once the political climate alters and a link is again forged between political dissenters and social-minded trade unionists.

Even in this age of television, there is power in the printed word. When this printed word dovetails with larger social drifts, it can again be an instrument in reshaping our social environment. Unfortunately, young intellectuals, who twenty years ago were intensely interested in the doings of labor unions and were instrumental in enlarging the horizons of many a unionist, have, for understandable

reasons, grown disillusioned with the labor movement, and turned their attention to other pursuits. The considerable literature on labor that is currently being issued by the university industrial relations divisions cannot fill the gap: it is either exclusively academic and grubbing in researches of small areas—a literature of, by, and for technicians; or, under an elaborate facade of supposed scientific neutrality, it is a rationalizer of the status quo.

It is our hope that this volume will be a contribution toward a growing analytical and critical literature on the labor movement which, as time goes on, will lead to a dialogue between unionists and political radicals and help create a new association of thought between the two. As in every compilation of this nature, the different essays contain varying nuances of belief. But there is an overriding unity which gives the volume an integrated character both of approach and purpose.

It was thought unnecessary to include a bibliography since a selective list of book references invariably tends to become little more than a duplicate of the many similar bibliographies already published in previous labor books. We want to call attention, however, to a number of comprehensive bibliographies that have been published by the universities in the past few years. *A Trade Union Library 1955,* issued by the Industrial Relations Section of Princeton University, is a useful miscellaneous reference work. *A Bibliography of American Labor Union History* by Maurice F. Neufeld, issued by the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, is a good selection, especially of studies on individual unions. The Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations of the University of Illinois has published two excellent bibliographies: *History of Labor and Unionism in the United States,* and *Structure and Government of American Labor Unions,* the latter containing short abstracts of selected literature in the field. *Syllabus of Industrial Relations* by Harold L. Wilensky, published by the University of Chicago Press, will be found valuable for references to material in learned journals; while *A Decade of Industrial Relations Research 1946-1956,* edited by Neil W. Chamberlain, Frank C. Pierson, and Theresa Wolfson, published by Harper and Brothers, has good bibliographies of the literature of the past decade on union government, collective bargaining,

wage determination, labor economics, employee benefit plans, and labor movements abroad. *History and Theories of Working Class Movements* by Charles A. Gulick, Roy A. Ockert, and Raymond J. Wallace, published by the University of California, Berkeley, is an extensive bibliography of articles and documents appearing in journals and magazines covering a number of countries besides the United States.

BERT COCHRAN

New York City
January 1959

AMERICAN LABOR IN MIDPASSAGE

BY BERT COCHRAN

> Behold, there come seven years of plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. And there shall arise after them seven years of famine.
> *Genesis*, XLI:29-30

I

1. The Beneficent Fifties

IF in the golden twenties the American businessman machined the country down to his own Rotarian image, under whose watchful gaze college professors, newspaper editors, and the politicians of the vital center extolled the system's superlative virtues and pronounced the product good, what shall we say of the beneficent fifties, when the heights of one utopia after another have not only been scaled but secured? Where Thomas Nixon Carver saw the American economic revolution "making laborers their own capitalists" and "compelling the capitalists to become laborers," we have now entered with David Riesman into the cubistic Nirvana where all of us are members of an assorted middle class and where the rulers cannot be distinguished from the ruled. The "New Capitalism" has been replaced by "People's Capitalism," but the latter is every bit as potent as its predecessor in wholesale distribution of stock ownership among widows and orphans, in the shift of incomes in favor of the lower brackets,

and in its crowning glory of permanent prosperity where unemployment and depressions are but relics of a vanished Americana alongside the buffalo and stagecoach.

In a sense, the orchestration of the twenties appears on the crude and naive side compared to the atonal subtleties of our own day. Our fathers understood full well the technique of the Big Trumpet Blast, but they did not appreciate sufficiently the importance of indirection. They had not entirely grasped the corrosive power of sheer confusion. They had yet to learn the deadliness of intellectual jugglery. They were still in the Middle Period of the American Jubilee. But Freud, Max Weber, and Elmo Roper have not labored in the vineyard in vain. Our modern communications experts are now able to revive the casuistries of the medieval schoolmen with the garnishment of motivational research, depth psychology, and sampling techniques. The distance between the old *Collier's* and Luce's *Life* and *Time* is the distance between the old flickers and Todd-A-O.

The businessman's intellectual reconquest of America after World War II is a more remarkable achievement than was his reassertion of long-exercised power after World War I. The prosperity of Harding-Coolidge "normalcy" appeared a solidly based affair thoroughly grounded in time-honored principles of economics and finance and underwritten by the probity and business genius of our merchant princes. The swollen military establishment had been disbanded after the war. What was considered at that time a staggering war-time debt of $25 billion was being slowly but surely reduced. The businessman's peaceful pursuits at home, rewarded by a golden geyser, found their counterpart in the quest for peace abroad as the necessary adjunct of Christian trade and investment. In the latter instance also, the good work was fittingly capped with the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact at the end of the twenties in which the major powers solemnly pledged to renounce war as an instrument of national policy. Certainly the boosters and promoters had some strong talking points.

For the success of the American Celebration of the fifties, greater tribute must be accorded to the sundry manufacturers of public opinion in both Washington and Madison Avenue. To be able to silence every voice of criticism, to stamp the occasional dissenter a pariah and cast him out of polite society, to grip the country with the compulsive rhythms of its tribal chant—after the Great Depression and World War II, in the midst of a cold war, and while the peoples cower in mortal fear of still another military explosion—surely that is the equal of any one of the Seven Wonders of the World. If not that, then it must rank as proof of the supremacy of power over thought, or the ability of power to bend a nation's thought to its own purposes.

While other countries are wracked with social tensions, and the moneyed classes of even Britain and West Germany must reckon with political opposition, the United States entrepreneur, emerged as the world empire builder, is the beneficiary of an internal unity and conformity that his predecessors in the twenties might well envy. Radicalism has for practical purposes disappeared. Liberalism has become but a state of nostalgia or inertia, where it has not been enlisted among the tom-tom drummers of anti-Communism and cold war. The intellectuals are working at good pay for the foundations, and the *avant-garde* has donned Ivy League clothes and secured teaching positions in the universities. Frederick Lewis Allen, the chronicler of the twenties, wrote that the bright young college graduate who in 1915 would have risked disinheritance to march in a socialist parade yawned at socialism in 1925, but was in revolt under the banner of H. L. Mencken against religion and puritan morality. In the fifties, the college graduate had been drained of all revolt and inoculated against any enthusiasms. He was a soft-spoken and conservatively dressed philistine.

How was the tide of the thirties reversed so successfully? The hucksters and scribes may have swollen in importance as the formulators of our opinions and the arbiters of our tastes. Nevertheless, big social trends do not originate in Madison Avenue, nor is the basic fabric of a social period woven out of slogans. The publicity men are important people, but as troubadours, not architects, of our society. As before, the decision-makers are the uncrowned nobility in control of our economic patrimony. They hated the New Deal and all through the thirties were resolved to turn the clock back. But vast impersonal forces had to be set into operation before they were able to mint their schemings into coin of the realm. The great war put their system back to work for them and transformed a discredited oligarchy into an honored elite. A system with a gross national product of around $80 billion in the thirties came out of a war that ruined the

European powers, doing a business of over $153 billion (in constant 1939 dollars).

Wage and salary workers were able to gather at the edges of this bounteous festival. They were permitted to work at fairly steady jobs and at hourly rates which improved their living standards by something like a half or better over what they had before the start of the war effort. But the boom of the fifties saw no resurrection of the hopes or illusions about the banishment of war. Bolshevism, which Winston Churchill had failed to strangle in the cradle after World War I, had grown into a lusty rival by the fifties. The spread of a hostile social system built up a garrison psychology among America's rulers leading to a witch hunt at home and a cold war abroad. The intrusion of a military state operating within the traditional institutional framework of a parliamentary democracy cowed dissent and frightened an already badly disoriented and shell-shocked people. At the time that the shibboleths of liberalism became the going currency of official declarations and the rationale of public policy, the old liberal perspectives had crumbled, the old watchwords were drained of content, the old signposts no longer carried conviction, the loyalties and alliances of the past were broken.

2. The Liberal Rationale

In the midst of the smashup of the radical Left and the liberal Left of Center, the trade union movement has stood up stalwartly, a tribute to the discipline and organizational staying power of the working people. Against the background of the failures of other reform movements, its achievements take on added hue. Even former critics have taken to praising the labor organizations, endorsing their leaders, and devising exegeses for their policies. The feeling has become widespread in liberal circles that while unions may lack the glitter of more radical intellectual bodies, their solid virtues of steadfastness and practicality, coupled with salutary caution and conservatism, have seen them through where the more mercurial have faltered and eventually vanished.

The existence of this immense labor movement is a fact and it is difficult to argue with facts. To add an equally unchallengeable saw, there is nothing in the whole world so persuasive as success, and the union movement is undoubtedly an organizational success. Our admiration, however, is tempered by the knowledge that the unions' forward movement had to all intents and purposes ground to a stop five years ago, and that since the passage of the Taft-Hartley law, labor has been preoccupied with rear-guard actions. The labor movement's achievement of coming through trying times is likewise compromised by its ready adaptation to the rules of the game as laid down by the dominant business community. The labor leaders are not framers of decisions that determine the structure of this society. They are not initiators or consultants on national policies. They are not even dissenters in a decade of unexampled reaction. They have sought rather to become one of the components of the status quo in the hope that they would thereby be permitted to consolidate their organizations as a reward for good behavior.

The decade of labor retreat before triumphant reaction has been climaxed with the recent internal paroxysm over racketeering. This has made some wonder whether the labor movement is relaxing in the pause that refreshes preparatory for a new lunge ahead; or whether the present labor movement is already beset with the maladies of old age so that it lacks the resilience to face up to the challenges of a fast-moving age. Because "everybody" in the so-called liberal public knows that Walter Reuther and George Meany are "realists" and their policies the only reliable guides for the American labor movement is no more conclusive evidence of where labor is heading than was Selig Perlman's apotheosis of the Gompers tradition at the very time that the AFL was falling apart. There is a large class of people prone to worship power, and in the case of intellectuals, to ascribe to leaders of institutions a wisdom and foresight which they themselves are unaware of and, in any case, generally do not possess.

But leaders of an institution which has had some success are not disposed to dissect with a fine scalpel the different strands of their policies in order to determine scientifically the effectiveness of its several parts. The whole program tends to become frozen into a dogma upon whose continuance is supposed to depend the fate of the organization and the well-being of its membership. When conditions alter, the leaders, who matured in an earlier period and under a different set of conditions, resist desperately any shifts which will disturb their vested interests and ingrained habits of work. Thus is

created the overriding propensity to justify the present and to assume its indefinite continuation into the future.

To take an analogy of the past: Gompers' craft unionism represented a necessary stage of American trade unionism and its victory over the Knights of Labor was neither historic freak nor accident. But when some, because of this, sought to make of job consciousness, voluntarism, and no-politics, a holy trinity, and darkly insinuated that the slightest deviation could only be contemplated at the risk of imperiling the safety, welfare, and best interests of the workingman, they sought to freeze history at this given point and to transform a passing strategy which soon became outworn into a social absolute. It is therefore not surprising in the fifties when the voice of the philistine is again heard loud and self-confident in our land, that the practices of the bigger and more influential labor movement should have been converted into a new gospel the very questioning of which immediately stamps the interlocutor as deaf to the country's authentic rhythms.

And yet, trade union practices are so much the product of drift, inertia, catering to the lowest common denominator, reflexive actions to safeguard the bureaucratic machine, that labor leaders are often the least qualified people to discern changes in the environment and adapt their activities to new requirements. The ferocity with which the Hutchesons, Tobins, and Freys resisted the tide of the thirties strongly suggests that the labor bureaucrat as a social type is not well placed to practice the crafts of the disinterested social analyst and is often congenitally unsuited to disturb the rounds of his habitual routine. As a matter of fact, trade union philosophy, so-called, is such an unrefined mixture of taken-for-granted tradition, unexamined assumption, and pragmatic usage, liberally interlarded with public-relations bunkum and politician's blarney, that it takes a good bit of doing simply to disentangle with any degree of accuracy the actual practices and thinking of the labor unions as distinguished from their official rhetoric. The resolutions adopted at union conventions often bear the same relation to their activities as do the platforms of our two political parties. They are not totally unrelated, they often furnish invaluable clues to where the body may be hidden, but the social analyst who would take them at face value would place himself in the same category as the psychoanalyst who reconstructed a personality on the basis of the patient's appraisal of himself. As in other fields, an accurate image will not be gained through the sole use of photography or the labors of a Univac. Human reason is indispensable to synthesize the relevant data.

Union policy is dominated by a central contradiction. In practice, unions are distinct class organizations set up for the specific purpose of utilizing their bargaining power as a collectivity to force concessions like more wages and better conditions of work out of the employers. The struggle between the two is palpable whether it takes the form of strikes, the calling out of police, the securing of court injunctions, the violent barring of scabs from struck establishments; or whether the contest is pressed by means of a diplomatic tug-of-war at a well-appointed bargaining table with both sides engaged in friendly examination of statistical charts and consideration of comparative production costs—but where, as in all diplomatic encounters, there is the implicit threat of force if diplomacy fails. But just as nations never go to war for markets, raw materials, spheres of influence, and strategic territories, but invariably do battle only for democracy, freedom, and the rights of small nations, so unions are not class organizations designed to further the interests of their constituencies at the expense of the capitalist class, but are a supra-class or non-class "group" organized for the set purpose of joining with other "groups" to realize common aims. Far from there being an irrepressible conflict between labor and capital, there actually exists a confluence of interest between all "groups": labor, management, the farmer, the professional, the banker, the consumer, the housewife. We have only to discover the underlying community of interests to ensure ready adjustments of conflicting claims among the "groups" and to guarantee harmony in the nation at large.

How account for the recurring warfare between workers and employers, and the savage assaults on unions by courts and legislatures? It would seem that the cause of the trouble lies in the existence of small groups of extremists who are intent on pursuing their own selfish interests at the expense of the community, or else that they are simply irresponsible, or are living in the past, or in the grip of outlived dogmas and are intent on upsetting the applecart of peace and harmony—which brawling is of benefit neither to themselves, nor their confreres, nor to the community at large. The

formula for industrial peace is therefore simple: all that is needed is for the spokesmen on both sides to understand the true situation. This will lead to mutual confidence, mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual appreciation of each other's point of view. Then, with good will, and mindful of the public trust and their obligations to the nation, no problem would resist solution.

There is a difference between the liberal rhetoric of the spokesmen of the nation-state and of the labor movement. No matter how intoxicated the former may become with the exuberance of their own eloquence, they never dare to deviate from the thin line of national self-interest, and they are held to strict accountability by powerful elites whose class instincts have been refined over centuries. Not so with the labor leaders. These cater to publics whose broad aims are ill-defined, poorly understood, and whose social concepts are often set by the dominant aristocracy. The labor leader, while usually a worker in social origin, and busying himself more or less exclusively with the demands of his working-class constituency, has personally ascended into the middle class. He enjoys a middle-class income, has opportunity to associate with middle-class people, and on his shoulders falls the full impact of an unfriendly public opinion of an essentially middle-class-thinking country. For the labor bureaucrat, the liberal rhetoric represents something more than just conventional cant designed to lubricate the wheels of labor's public relations. It is an essential of his innermost striving to get the labor movement accepted as part and parcel of the American social structure and to get himself accorded the status of an accredited professional in American public life. How much of the rhetoric he actually believes and how much of it he accepts in the way Napoleon accepted religion, even he himself probably does not know. In any case, apart from exceptional periods of social unrest, the force of the rationale has been irresistible in this country as it conforms to accepted mores and its vapid homilies blend in naturally with the main drift.

3. Working with the Community

The labor movement that issued out of the forges of the New Deal was considerably altered in size, structure, composition, and tensile strength from Gompers' setup. As the new unionism was a mass

affair and its activities could affect the life of the whole nation, its leaders quickly realized that they needed a broader social philosophy than had done duty for the old building trades business agent negotiating for a handful of mechanics. The vacuous middle-class rhetoric of the Progressive era, when given a dash of Social Democratic spicing, suited the requirements of the times perfectly and provided the right mixture of reformist high-mindedness and down-to-earth practicality. "We need labor organizations," said Philip Murray, "that will not merely advance the immediate interests of particular groups of labor, but will regard the interests of the industry as a whole, including the workers, and of the economic system." (Philip Murray and Morris L. Cooke, *Organized Labor and Production,* New York, 1940, p. 247.) The *AFL-CIO News* of September 20, 1958, reported a speech of George Meany at a luncheon gathering of the Greater New York Fund as follows:

> Asserting that there is no such thing as a proletariat in this country, Meany pointed out that labor's concept of its part in community life involves its conviction that there are no class, religious or color lines dividing workers from other citizens. "Here in America we do not think in terms of separate classes. We consider ourselves an integral part of community life, and we seek progress with the rest of the community as it advances." He characterized the Greater New York Fund as a typical American activity that affects the lives of many millions of people.

Or, as it has been propounded in jet-age business executive jargon by Walter Reuther:

> I think more and more it [the trade union movement] has to fight for economic policies that reflect the needs of our whole society . . . You take this profit-sharing idea. This has frightened a lot of people because they don't understand why we propose this. The profit-sharing idea was not a demand; it was a mechanism. In the profit-sharing scheme we're trying to find a rational means by which free labor and free management, sitting at the bargaining table, can attempt to work out in their relationship practical means by which you can equate the competing equities —in workers and stockholders and consumers. (*New Republic,* July 21, 1958.)

Beneath the sonorous rhetoric of the democratic community marching arm in arm toward the morning, the new crop of trade

unionists have inherited from the old an inner conviction that there is an overwhelming power in the community that can readily be arrayed against them, that the worker has only a limited loyalty to his union and its officials (shown by the extraordinary importance still attached to the closed shop, union shop, and check-off of dues), and that unions are only a minority force in the nation. "Working with the community" thus naturally gets translated into a hunt for alliances with liberals and so-called liberals on the make. These alliances are taken very seriously. They are presumed to take the curse off labor's exposed position, as the American public, according to the official dispensation, will not tolerate labor "domination." The alliances furthermore have allegedly surrounded labor with good friends without whose support it could not withstand the attacks of enemies or forge ahead.

The labor leaders saw in their most crucially formative years labor triumph over open shop citadels which had repulsed the efforts of previous generations of unionists, and, being unaccustomed to thinking in dialectical terms of action and interaction, they attributed the accomplishment to a benign government. They believe at one and the same time in the omnipotence of the government, while, in characteristic American fashion, holding that this same government can be manipulated by one side as well as the other, provided sufficient pressure is brought to bear. In any case, it was inevitable that as the unions grew big and important they would be pulled into the domain of government, first, as objects of regulation; then, through their own attempts to influence government in their direction. To balance themselves in the new circumstances, the labor leaders have attempted to extend their bargaining powers into the political field through the perfection of new organizational machinery. But they view themselves not as tribunes of an underdog class that has finally got itself reasonably well organized, but as upstarts who must prove their statesmanship to the established leaders of society. Above all, they must not frighten away potential allies in the liberal world by an appearance of intransigence or extremism. It was consequently written in the stars that the unions' political activity would find its expression at first through a bloc with the Democratic Party, or at least with a good part of its Northern and Western sections.

Labor's terms have been modest in the extreme. The Democratic politicians are permitted pretty much to write their own ticket on most matters. All they need do in return for labor support is to give backing, and often pretty equivocal backing, to a certain number of social welfare proposals, running from the mild to the innocuous, which the unions favor, and to oppose the cruder union-busting bills which periodically get introduced. When John L. Lewis, who as a personality is built along more heroic lines than the mine-run labor official, tried to force President Roosevelt into paying a somewhat higher price, a price which the European labor movements had exacted many years before, the other labor leaders threw up their hands in horror at the arrogance and presumption of their chief and promptly deserted him. William Green at the head of a crew of AFL and CIO officials turned up at the White House to demonstratively present a birthday cake to the President! In the face of a decade of mounting inflation, the labor leaders have still not raised their price. Their eyes are fixed on the goal of better organization at the precinct level, which they are convinced will sooner or later pay off and return them to the Eldorado of another New Deal.

The current crop of labor officials, particularly of the CIO, had another traumatic experience which has engraved itself indelibly on their minds. Many of them, it should be recalled, had intensive dealings with radicals in the unions' formative period. A number of them, truth to tell, have political backgrounds which could not withstand close scrutiny of the Congressional witch-hunt committees. These men have seen the most powerful radical movement of their time, the Communist, smashed like an eggshell, because it was found to be disloyal to this system and its institutions. Like the German Social Democrats who drew from Hitler's triumph the lesson that they must never again permit themselves to be outflanked on the front of nationalism and national loyalty, our present generation of labor officials has resolved that their patriotism must ever stand beyond reproach. They have interpreted this in extreme form so as to pass muster with preponderant segments of the conservative community. The result is that "People's Capitalism" is as safe with George Meany and Walter Reuther as the "New Capitalism" was with William Green and Matthew Woll.

There is something involved here that goes beyond the necessi-

ties of respectability and acclimatization to the dictates of official public opinion. The labor bureaucrat is a distinct social type. As he emerges fully from his previous incarnation of shop worker or craftsman, and establishes his new sets of relationships, he grows acutely conscious that his career rests upon the maintenance of the union, and that the union as it is presently constituted rests upon the market-place relationships which are known in uncouth circles as capitalism. The repeated avowals of labor leaders that they stand four-square for the private property system come straight from the heart. Naturally, they call for improvements. But they feel as deep an attachment to the system, to which their careers are tied, as does the broker to the stock market or the Texas millionaire to his oil well. Little wonder that in an era of unprecedented reaction, amid the trampling underfoot of traditional democratic liberties, the labor leader has enthusiastically taken his place in the ranks of the cold war armies and is battling Communism in the fifties with all the dedication with which Matthew Woll blazed the trail in the twenties. As a group of prominent labor officials phrased it in the Wilsonian language that is stylish today, "the fate of free institutions and the future of the labor movement are inseparable."

4. The Administrative Virtues

American trade unionists have always prided themselves on their practicality. There is a long tradition of hostility to "ideology," which is equated with derailing the energies of the labor movement in favor of irrelevant, visionary schemes to the neglect of the workers' daily bread-and-butter needs. The labor bureaucrat does not see himself a plumed knight even in his most exalted flights of fancy. It stands to reason therefore that in his official mythology he has elevated to pre-eminence the administrative, not the martial, virtues. Sobriety, steadiness, fidelity to detail, efficiency in routine, smooth functioning, mastering the grievance machinery of the contract, small, regulated gains from year to year—this is the rock on which the labor movement is allegedly built and perseveres.

The living generations of labor officials are too close to the thirties to deny that the great breakthrough came out of a social explosion. But they tip their hats to this exception to their rule of

the "inevitability of gradualness" and "progress via administrative routine" in order to gloss over its meaning. They act in much the same way as liberal historians who are wont to incorporate inexplicable "breaks" such as revolutions and civil wars into their smooth-flowing narratives with the complacent implication that human intelligence has progressed sufficiently to avoid hereafter similar unreasonable and unruly manifestations.

One of the clichés of the labor leaders which by sheer force of repetition has attained the status of unassailable fact, is that labor's "heroic age" is now over. This is supposed to signify that while the "rabble rouser" may have been necessary twenty years ago in the frontier days of the new unionism, labor and capital have now matured to the point where they have learned to live with each other. Hence, with the arrival of the new age of reason, the talents of the agitator have become as obsolete as the skills of the green glass bottle blower with the introduction of the Owens automatic machine. The day of the flying squadron and the angry-voiced table pounder is past. The times call for the sober administrator, the smooth negotiator, the knowledgeable statistician, the genial lobbyist.*

---

* David Dubinsky, recently addressing the graduating class at the ILGWU Institute declared: "Thirty years ago the important thing was for a union leader to know how to organize economic strength. Organize! Strike! Settle! That was labor-management relations. But today, with laws and labor boards, almost all of our problems are settled at the conference table, through negotiations. This requires new skills, a different kind of intelligence. Now, it is diplomacy instead of the big stick." (*Justice,* June 15, 1958.)

One of the union technicians, William Abbott, assistant education director of the AFL-CIO Rubber Union, is distinctly impatient with critical old-timers: "Today, conditions have changed. Labor must live with the contracts it has won. A union can't rouse its members to strike every time a worker has a grievance. There is a mutually agreed-to law of the plant, and the union must develop a sense of responsibility to live up to its agreements. Responsibility doesn't mean weakness or selling out to the NAM; it's a sign of maturity, a growing up which the old romantics might well ponder." (*The Progressive,* August 1958.)

Two labor statesmen out of the Steel Union formulate the matter as a law of organization: ". . . most militant local union leaders, who rise to the surface in the organization stage of unions, fall by the side when the union moves into the stage of constructive relations with management." (Clinton S. Golden and Harold J. Ruttenberg, *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy,* New York, 1942, p. 58.)

A blood cousin to the philosophy of bureaucratism is opportunism. The glorification of the administrative arts goes hand in hand with the sanctification of the policy of drift. One of Gompers' better known dicta ran that the labor movement was built by tactics not ideals. This outlook was given its classic formulation by his friend, Adolph Strasser, who said: "We have no ultimate ends. We are going on from day to day." Of course, the present-day International Union is an elaborate, intricately graded, socially sensitive mechanism compared to the rather simple job organization of Strasser's Cigar Makers in the 1880s. But there is such a thing as the inner core of policy remaining the same while its externals undergo extravagant alterations. The Catholic Church has shown that it is possible to transplant authoritarianism from one to an altogether different social context by modifying practices and amending techniques. So, the modern unions have displayed an amazing ingenuity in adapting Gompers' opportunistic drift to modern times by introducing changes in the body while retaining much of the spirit.*

Eugene Debs, the pioneer of industrial unionism, thought that whereas craft unions naturally preoccupied themselves with minimum trade standards, industrial unionism, based on a broader solidarity, would inevitably aim not only to ameliorate work conditions, but for the ultimate abolition of the existing system. In the founding days when the CIO took the field and the response to its call swelled into a blazing crusade, it appeared that the prophecies of the pioneers were to be fulfilled. John L. Lewis, who for twenty years before (and for twenty years since) had extolled the virtues of capitalism, was in 1937 hurling one thunderbolt after another at the "money trust" and the "invisible government." The cry for "industrial democracy" was in the air. But with the stabilization of the new unions and the signing of contracts, the tide ebbed. In but a few years after the start of the "CIO Revolution," the new outfits settled down to the practice of a more up-to-date and efficient business unionism.

* "Adhering to the precept of Samuel Gompers to emphasize economic action, U.S. unions have not consciously sought to change society; however, they have materially assisted in achieving fundamental transformations as a by-product of their economic action." (*Trade Unions and Democracy*, by James B. Carey, Clinton S. Golden, Eric Peterson *et al.*, Washington, D.C., 1957.)

This is a big social fact, too big to be explained in terms of the careerist bents of individual leaders or fortuitous sequences of events. The very uniformity of the process from union to union punctures all theories that seek to account for it by stressing this or that accidental concatenation of circumstances.

The fact is: when the mass movement raged, even conservative leaders talked radical, and when the mass movement declined, even the radicals adopted a facade of conservatism. Confronted with this commanding social phenomenon, we are called upon, in the maxim of Spinoza, not to laugh, nor to cry, but to understand. What does the uninspiring evolution of the CIO mean? Is business unionism the only labor program which fits the American scene and which over the long pull can elicit the support of great bodies of workers, so that no matter what its origins, or initial moods, the metal inevitably cools into a conservative mold? Or, is labor painstakingly, and more slowly than had been anticipated, treading the path from simpler to higher forms of solidarity and cooperation? Finally, does the history of the labor movement provide a reasonable set of clues to an inner logic in the line of development? Or, is the lesson of history that there is no lesson of history?

II

5. Five Explosions

Union membership figures when analyzed in conjunction with strike statistics in the background of the initiating events furnish the most reliable data of the labor movement's development. The reasons are fairly clear. Large-scale union growth never takes place in isolation from large social events but is one of the components of a generalized labor surge. We want to review the history of the ebb and flow of unionism in an effort to find answers to our questions. We are passing over the early movements of the 1830s and the Civil War period as too far removed from the present, because the unions encompassed at that time relatively small numbers and America was a considerably different country; although, curiously enough, both movements followed oscillations similar to the later ones. If we set

the 1880s as the beginning of the modern labor movement, and go over the figures from that date to the present, we are immediately struck with a startling result: *The growth of American trade unions occurred in five brief explosions concentrated in relatively short periods of time against a background of major social upheavals brought on by depression or war.* A table of the five periods reads like this:

TABLE OF PERIODS OF RAPID UNION GROWTH*

Period	*Years*	*Number of years*	*Approximate membership growth*
I	1884-1886	3	From 110,000 to 950,000
II	1897-1903	7	From 447,000 to 1,914,000
III	1917-1920	4	From 3,061,000 to 5,048,000
IV	1934-1938	5	From 3,609,000 to 8,000,000
V	1940-1943	4	From 8,500,000 to 13,500,000

The yearly percentages of growth in these five explosive periods were invariably of a different order of magnitude than in the so-called normal years, which could be described more accurately as either years of stagnation, recession, or at best consolidation and slow extension of the gains made in the periods of breakthrough. The gross figures are equally telling. Over a period of 70 years, 14 million

* The figures for the Knights of Labor are from the official membership tabulations of the Order quoted in Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, New York, 1929. The figure for the early trade unions is estimated by Selig Perlman in John R. Commons and Associates, *History of Labor in the United States*, Vol. II, New York, 1918. The figures for 1897 to 1934 are Leo Wolman's estimates in *Ebb and Flow in Trade Unionism*, New York, 1936. The figures from 1934 to 1943 are Florence Peterson's estimates in *American Labor Unions*, New York, 1952. In all subsequent references, figures from 1934 up to 1951 are those of Florence Peterson. For more recent years, the figures are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

members were enrolled in the five periods of social upheaval. Possibly five million were recruited in normal times, and the largest part of these are accounted for in the recent decade when the labor force has been expanding very rapidly.*

The first period, called "The Great Upheaval" by the Commons historians, had all the earmarks of a social uprising. The rush into unions was of an intensity that had never been equalled up to that time and has never been exceeded since. From 1884 to 1886 the membership of the Knights of Labor rocketed from about 60,000 to 700,000, and the trade unions, most of which were soon to make up the AFL, shot up from roughly 50,000 to 250,000. An insignificant peripheral labor movement suddenly numbered a million members, a figure it was not to reach again until 1900. "The idea of solidarity of labor ceased to be merely verbal, and took on flesh and life; general strikes, sympathetic strikes, nation-wide boycotts, and nation-wide political movements became the order of the day, . . . The movement bore in every way the aspect of a social war. A frenzied hatred of labor for capital was shown in every important strike." (Commons, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 357, 374.)

The resentment had been building up during the depression of 1883-1885 when workers, already on the borderline of hunger, suffered sharp wage cuts and were lashed by extensive unemployment. Then, as is most commonly the case, with the first signs of upturn, the workers' renewed self-confidence fused with their bitter memories to erupt as a volcano of social passion. The unskilled and semi-skilled were swept into the elemental movement even more than the skilled trade unionists, and the tide rose menacingly until the grand push for the eight-hour day was smashed on the rock of the Haymarket affair. The tide then spilled over into a political revolt. Labor parties sprang up throughout the country and made surprising showings. Henry George in New York was possibly elected but counted out. In Chicago, where the community had been fanned into a frenzy of hate, the labor candidates polled better than a quarter of the total vote with a state senator and several assemblymen being elected. Other candidates were elected in a scatter of cities throughout the

* See Table I, Irving Bernstein, "Growth of American Unions," *American Economic Review*, June 1954.

nation. John Swinton noted in his paper that one demonstration of independent labor strength had brought more results than years of "balance of power" politics.

The second period of upheaval came like the first in the wake of a depression, possibly the most cruel, outside of the 1930s, of the past three quarters of a century. Factory jobs fell by almost a fifth between April and September 1893. At the end of the year *Bradstreets'* reported three million out of work. As there was no state system of relief, the jobless were dependent on charitable institutions, the municipalities, and private sources. Huge unemployed meetings of protest took place in major cities and culminated in General Coxey's march on Washington the following year. As in the depths of the previous depression, labor suffered crushing defeats in its defensive strikes, notably the attempt of the bituminous miners in 1894 to halt wage cuts, and the Pullman general strike, or as it was dubbed by the newspapers of the time, "Debs' Rebellion," likewise started by Pullman's unconscionable slashing of his workers' pay envelopes. The tide of discontent was rising in the countryside as well as in the cities, with the Populist revolt coming both to its climax and abortion after its submergence in the Democratic Party and the capture of the latter by the Bryan insurgents.

The business improvement that started in 1897 swelled into a boom with the Spanish-American War. This in turn set off a price inflation. With weekly hours in excess of 59 and yearly wages averaging roughly $400, labor discontent was at a white heat. The social climate veered sharply to the left as liberal-minded people were shocked at the callousness of the money barons to widespread suffering, and concerned about the future of the Republic in the face of their growing irresponsible power. The Progressive Era was set in motion with the nation rocking to muckrakers' exposés and the election to high office of idealistic liberals like "Golden Rule" Jones, Tom Johnson, and Robert La Follette.

Within a few months after business lifted in 1897, workers began pouring into unions and the strike curve rose precipitately. Inaugurated with the notable victory of 200,000 coal miners called "The spontaneous uprising of an enslaved people," the strike wave swept on, involving the steel industry in 1901, the San Francisco general strike of the same year, the great anthracite stoppage of 1902, and

the violent battles in the Western metal mines which blew up into a veritable civil war around Cripple Creek, Colorado.

The upsurge continued despite labor's bad defeat in 1901 at the hands of the steel trust, and was only stopped three years later by the employers' massive counter-offensive which the Commons history notes "stopped unionism in its tracks." The pendulum then began swinging back. The new climate was epitomized by Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University, publicly ranging himself on the side of the strikebreaker whom he called an "American hero."

The third period of insurgency was initiated not by depression but by war. Under this gargantuan head of steam, the economy frantically leaped forward and prices doubled from 1916 to 1920. With five million recruited into the armed forces and immigration down to a quarter of the prewar level, labor was in short supply and anxious to take advantage of the extraordinary circumstances to raise its wages and force the employers to deal with unions. A swift influx into unions was again under way. Taking advantage of the need for national unity, unions managed to infiltrate into hitherto sacrosanct open-shop domains in railroading, shipbuilding, marine transport, meat packing, lumber, munitions, textiles. As soon as the armistice was signed the stage was set for the greatest strike wave in American history.

The labor ranks were in a state of high militancy, spurred on by the widening gulf between soaring living costs and lagging wages. The workers were further stirred by the dashing of the exalted hopes that had been implanted in them by wartime propaganda. With their new-found organization strength, and excited by radical news from abroad, they sought to realize their wartime expectations of an improved status for labor and recognition of their organizations. The employers, on the other hand, were all set, now that the war was over, to push unionism out of their industries and return to the good old *status quo ante*. They proceeded to utilize the apparatus that had been created to marshal public opinion behind the war as a battering ram to extirpate the labor movement. Nineteen-nineteen was the year of decision. A strike wave unprecedented in its scope swept the country. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 4,160,000 workers, a fifth of all employees, participating that year, with the wave not finally spent until the defeat of the rail shopmen's strike in 1922. The AFL

proved unequal to the contest and was forced out of most of its recently won positions. The short depression that set in in 1921 completed the work of demoralization. The "American Plan" ruled the roost for the remainder of the twenties.

The fourth period, during the New Deal, was the biggest labor explosion in American history. While following the classic lines of the 1886 and 1893 movements, everything occurred on an enlarged scale, from the catastrophic plunge of the economy to the ferocity of the labor riposte with the first signs of an upturn. The popular revulsion against business leadership was of quasi-revolutionary intensity and the country lifted to the seat of government the most liberal administration heretofore seen. Moreover, seething around the commanding figure of Roosevelt were a variegated array of radical organizations ranging the length of the political spectrum, from Huey Long's and Father Coughlin's to Technocracy and Dr. Townsend's Old Age Pension movement. On the far Left, the Communists were making inroads into various reaches of American society.

The revolt rose in two successive waves. In the second, the labor legions brought the autocrats of industry to terms in a swirl of violent battles. The unions did not grow but erupted. The AFL leaders who at first thought to ride out the storm hurriedly modified some of their practices after 1937 lest they be engulfed. The country had never seen the working class united in such fighting formations and stood awestruck at the display of offensive power. The American trusts which had successfully repulsed all challenges for half a century finally succumbed. The scale and intensity of the attack dwarfed all previous ones, and the achievements cast into the shade those of the past. Unionism came out of the fray a social power and a mass movement. The social topography of the country underwent drastic alteration along welfare-statist lines so that a decade of subsequent reaction has not effaced many of the landmarks.

The final period of our table covering World War II resembles the World War I period to the extent that union expansion was tied directly to the dislocations and tensions set off by the war. But the unions now carried a bigger stick and spoke more bellicosely, as well. They could consequently excite more attention and strike better bargains.

When this country turned itself into the "arsenal of democracy"

and went into war production in 1940, unemployment was finally eliminated for the first time since 1929. At last America found a way to put its enormous productive apparatus to work. Industrial production skyrocketed 130 percent between 1939 and 1944. As soon as the factories started humming, a new organization and strike wave got started, and it seemed as if the CIO was about to resume its forward march after the lull of the 1937 depression and the defeat in Little Steel. Huge strikes quickly induced Ford and the holdout steel companies to sign up while similar battles were looming in many of the other war production industries. The government moved rapidly to perfect its control machinery, and after Pearl Harbor most of the union advances went through the rigidly prescribed channels of the War Labor Board.

But the eight-million man army that marched into the World War II period was extraordinarily virile and kept prodding its leaders with many unauthorized strikes and occasional insurgent movements. Outside of coal, these were all quickly stamped out with the active cooperation of the union heads, but they kept the latter hopping. Between 1940 and 1943, the unions swept an additional five million members into the fold. By taking advantage of the stringent labor market and the overwhelming pressure for the maintenance of uninterrupted production, labor was able to squeeze out sizable wage increases, at least compared with the past. Steady employment and overtime hours created yearly earnings that represented a material betterment of the traditional living standard.

With the end of the war, labor feared it was going to be shoved back to the bad old days. Hours were immediately cut back to forty a week. The average manufacturing worker who had been earning $46.35 in June was drawing $35.60 in September. Millions who had been upgraded to more skilled and better paying jobs were now downgraded to their pre-war classifications. Inflation was gathering momentum, and one month after V-J Day two million workers were unemployed. The signs looked ominous. The chilling realization that the immense sacrifice of blood and treasure was going to lead to no changes in the country's social setup heightened the unrest, which found expression in a spread of strikes. In 1946 the number of strikers rose to 4,600,000 or 14½ percent of all workers. The demand was for a 30-percent wage increase to maintain the previous take-

home pay. This time the employers could not duplicate their performance of 25 years earlier. The few experimental attempts to break strikes were answered with general strikes in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Stamford, Connecticut. The result was to establish a generally peaceful pattern for the strike movement. Some of the walkouts were fairly lengthy; the General Motors strike lasted almost four months. But in the end, labor won an 18½-cent hourly wage increase—an impressive victory. It was another year before the employers were able to turn the tables, and then it was by means of a legislative attack.

These five periods lend themselves to the generalization that unionism is a product of social revolt, not of bureaucratic effort. Union growth has been a derivative of mass insurgency, not slow accretion. The business agent can be considered the beneficiary, not the initiator of union growth. He administers and sometimes consolidates the achievements. He does not create them. Every one of the periods of growth was a period of social crisis. While the objectives of the struggles were of a limited reform character, through every one of the upheavals ran a heavy undertone of radicalism which shaped to one extent or another the temper of the uprising, and which inspired some sections of the movement with more extreme aims.

The crises of 1886, of 1920, and of 1936 gave rise to labor parties. In the 1897-1903 period, Laborite-Populist currents merged into the Socialist. In the New Deal, a serious Communist movement arose. Only in the World War II period was the surge of militancy confined generally to the union sphere, expressed in the opposition to the no-strike pledge in a number of CIO unions and culminating in the strike wave after the war. The absence of political radicalism in this last period was probably due to an exceptional cause unlikely ever to recur in American labor history. The dominant radical organization of the time was the Communist Party. As a reflector of Russian policy, it was throughout the war years in a head-on clash with every manifestation of labor militancy rather than the promoter of it. The surge of dissatisfaction was consequently dammed up in exclusively trade union channels and deprived of its traditionally most resolute radical leaders—in contrast to every one of the preceding periods of extraordinary labor growth.

The years between these five explosive periods account for a very small part of the growth of total union membership. After 1886, the Knights rapidly collapsed while the AFL and independent national unions grew slightly, with probably a good part of their new memberships coming from the adhesion of groups formally attached to the Knights. When the next explosion occurred, the movement started from a plateau of less than half the membership of its 1886 peak. After the second wave had passed, the labor movement registered hardly any growth until 1910, and then only a slow crawl upwards until the war period beginning with 1917 sent the figures ripping to their all time pre-New Deal high of 5 million. Over 70 percent of the growth of 800,000 during the ten-year period from 1903 to 1913 was likewise bunched into the short space from 1910 to 1913 when the Progressive movement was at its climactic point, and when the sensational victory of the IWW in the Lawrence strike appeared to presage a new organization wave of the unskilled similar to the uprising of the eighties—a wave which probably got washed away because of this country's rapid industrial expansion as it became the workshop and banker of its European allies. The next period after 1920 was one of labor recession which by the middle of the twenties turned into disintegration. By 1933 the unions had slumped to below the three-million mark.

Gompers' business unionism had not broken the previous tie of the labor movement to the social cycle. It had not substituted growth by organization routine for the elemental heavings of the earlier days. What Gompers had accomplished was the stabilization of the penetrations effected during the high points of social stress so that the unions could survive and persevere in bad times of economic depression or political reaction. Organization stabilization should not be confused with social stabilization. But organization stabilization was a *tour de force* and is the watershed marking off the Gompers movement from that of the past. Before him, the trade unions of the 1830s were wiped out in the depression of 1837; the trade unions of the Civil War period scarcely survived the hard days of 1873; the Knights of Labor disappeared after 1890. The AFL broke this aspect of the cycle by weathering the depression of 1893 and establishing a *continuous* organization. But after Gompers, as before him, growth was negligible between the periods of insurgency.

The CIO, heavily concentrated in the mass production industries, has been even more intimately linked to the social ups and downs. Its formation was almost synonymous with the uprising of the thirties. It was able to bring into the fold the major holdouts of the first drive, like Ford and Little Steel, not by simple extension, but in the short wave that preceded Pearl Harbor. Its next period of growth, like that of the AFL, came in the war years. The one conceivable exception to this rule is the recent decade, when labor has grown in the midst of social passivity and political reaction. But actually the curve is about the same as in the previous decades.

The approximate three million gain in membership between 1947 and 1956 in the teeth of the Taft-Hartley law is substantial as a gross figure and can be accounted for only by the stronger attractive power inherent in this big mass as compared to past unionism. Analogous to the AFL's ability, by its perfection of stable organization, to transcend the old cycle of the 1830s and 1860s when unions would sprout in good times and disappear in depressions, the present movement, better entrenched and disposing of larger assets, has been able to bulge by sheer bureaucratic encroachment even in a period of reaction. It operated almost in accordance with the laws of Newtonian mechanics. But the rhythm of the past has persisted, given the greater amplitude of this larger body's movements. Its rate of growth has slid precipitately downward from the New Deal and war periods to about the rate of growth of the AFL from 1904 to 1916; unionism has entered no new fields; and its "real" membership, that is, as a percentage of either the civilian labor force or wage and salary earners, has remained roughly stationary.

6. The Search for a Theory

John R. Commons was the first to try to formulate a general law which would explain the motive causes behind labor's ebbs and flows. He concluded that the movement of wholesale prices was the clue to labor's oscillations and that the cycle was being consistently repeated. His well-known generalization reads that in "periods of rising prices, when the cost of living was outleaping the rise of wages, when business was prosperous and labor in demand, then aggressive strikes, trade unionism, class struggle, suddenly spread over the industrial

sections of the country. At the other extreme, in the periods of falling prices, with their depression of business and distress by unemployment, labor, in its helplessness and failure of defensive strikes, has turned to politics, panaceas, or schemes of universal reform, while class struggle has dissolved in humanitarianism." (Commons, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 11.)

Writing in the midst of the depression of the thirties, Commons gave the thought a more apocalyptic turn in his article on the labor movement in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*: "The two goals which divide labor movements are displacement of capitalism and bargaining with capitalism . . . . In periods of rising prices, of increasing profits and growing demand for labor, bargaining with capitalism predominates . . . . In periods of falling prices, of decreasing profits and unemployment, the displacement of capitalism predominates as the goal . . . . Political activity, Communist agitation and quasi-revolutionary strikes replace the 'business' strikes of unionism."

The idea is obviously a useful one and adequately covers some situations. But as a sweeping generalization, it will not stand up, not for the earlier movements, and even less for the recent. The 1886 labor offensive, occurring at the start of an upturn, saw the spread of aggressive strikes and with their defeat immediately passed over to a political offensive—all in a period of upturn. With the strengthening of the modern labor movement, the rhythms become even more complex and the interactions more involved. As a continuing institution, unions exert a larger influence in channelizing the chaotic social gyrations. Consequently, the relationship between labor's social actions and the economic cycle, which never proceeded along lines of a crude economic determinism, have become more devious, with a greater criss-crossing of connecting strands.

For example, in 1922-1924, a period of economic boom, the unions were stagnating, but labor-party politics was on the ascendant. Again in 1936, a period of economic rise (although unemployment remained high), the aggressive strike movement was paralleled with aggressive political forays as well as the rise of extreme radicalism. To determine the reasons for these several developments, it is necessary to analyze in their dynamic unfoldment the reciprocal influences of economic conditions, workers' moods, status of their or-

ganizations, character of their leaders, political climate. The dialectical interaction accounts for the main trend. Commons started with a valuable germ of an idea, but it has to be stripped of its crude economism (which Marx would never have countenanced) and enriched with an appreciation of the complex reciprocities which go into determining the rhythm of social events.

Irving Bernstein, repelled by this kind of oversimplified economism, has gone to the opposite extreme. Relying on statistical hocus-pocus, he has concluded that "union membership falls outside the ambit of the business cycle." (*American Economic Review,* June, 1954, p. 313.) In leaping out of the frying pan of straight-line determinism, he has fallen into the fire of Hoxie's undifferentiated pluralism. (R. F. Hoxie, *Trade Unionism in the United States,* New York, 1921.) A complex social process consequently has gotten reduced to a listing of unevaluated and disconnected "factors." However, Bernstein has made a valuable contribution by classifying Commons' periods of labor upsurge and trying to determine their relation to the complex of social and economic events.

The American experience definitely reveals a tendency toward large scale strike activity at the beginning of economic upturn following major depressions. The upsurge has its origins in the accumulation of grievances in the course of the depression. But the masses are then too demoralized for offensive actions. Those that have jobs are fearful of jeopardizing them, while the few defensive strikes against wage cuts are more often lost than won. At the same time, a certain division occurs between the unemployed and employed, reducing the possibilities for coordinated efforts. With the beginning of business recovery as the jobless get called back, self-confidence is restored and the gnawing humiliations but recently endured are transmuted into a movement of protest. At any rate, such has been the course of the cycle in the past century. Developments in Western Europe have followed roughly similar paths, although at times modified because of the existence of powerful labor parties. The tendency can apparently be effaced completely only in the face of the virtual breakdown of a social order, as in the case of Germany in 1918. In such an instance, the mass tide is so overwhelming as to free itself for the moment from any dependence on the economic cycle.

In the case of the horrendous dislocations issuing from the two mass wars of modern times, both produced upsurges which came at the conclusion of the war and both were related to profound complexes of desires for improved status and retention of gains made. The upsurge was violent and bitter after World War I because the opposition was savage. The upsurge subsided rather rapidly after the recent war because it won concessions and thought its positions had been secured. Economic troubles were not the only or even the main explanation for the tensions. There were difficulties, it is true, because of rationing, war shortages, lack of housing facilities, price inflation. But it was not these alone that accounted for the waves of unrest. It was above all the break-up of the normal flow of life. Vast armies of humanity were suddenly uprooted from their traditional associations and forcibly transplanted to foreign and inhospitable soils. Dear ones were being drafted for the battlefields. Long standing values were suddenly called into question. Stability and tradition seemed to crumble into dust in the general paroxysm of society. In times of peace, millionaires had excited envy or had been casually accepted as a normal end-product of competitive capitalism. But the coining of fortunes out of the blood and agony of a nation excited contempt and indignation. As soon as the war pressure for national unity eased, the accumulated dissatisfactions erupted.

In a word, any ruthless tearing up of the customary routine, whether because of depression or war, by hunger or uprootment, releases vast dissatisfactions that ever lie latent beneath the surface. The irrationality of the ordering of man's existence in a discriminatory class society suddenly looms provocatively large in these periods and quickens the impulse for change.

The precise paths that the upsurge follows, whether it pursues economic or political objectives or both, or trade union or anti-capitalist objectives or both, depend on labor's outlook, ambitions, morale, consciousness, the support it enjoys from other sections of the population, as well as on the strength of the opposition it faces. There is no single formula which can explain universally why some struggles succeed and some fail, why some are restricted to trade unionism and some expand into more all-sided crusades, why sometimes labor takes to politics after it is thwarted in the economic field and at other times lapses into passivity and discouragement, or why at still

other times it undertakes both simultaneously. The hunt for one theoretical key which will unlock all doors is bound to be abortive. These multifarious responses can only be explained by specific analysis. What can guide and illumine the analysis is a class theory of history which satisfactorily delineates the motive forces creating these tensions and conflicts and can illumine the broad trend of dynamic development.

Where the pluralists go astray is not in some of their specific insights but in their failure to comprehend that without a guiding theory, the analyst has no thread on which to hang his beads of research. As Russell S. Bauder confessed at a meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, "One of the great difficulties in trying to frame research projects is that we start with no theory, and end with no theory, and hence find ourselves only with an accumulation of data which we do not know how to use." (IRRA, *Proceedings*, 1950, p. 171.)

7. Triumph of Business Unionism

The labor story is one of union growth as a consequence of militant struggles in the course of social upheavals. This towering proposition stands at variance with the official historiography of laborism. But there is another towering proposition: after every upsurge the labor organizations settle down to business unionism. Radicals, who are welcome during the short, heroic bursts, are discarded and often execrated as soon as the unions garner bargaining rights and seek to nail down their small advantages. This has happened not once but over and over again. The old sets of radical leaders, like Martin Irons, head of the Gould Southwest rail strike in 1885, or the insurgents heading the huge outlaw strikes of the early 1920s, badly miscalculated the extent of their support, were defeated by superior force—and eased out in favor of a more conservative crew. But the evolution of the CIO officialdom tells the story more impressively. For here was an insurgent movement that was not defeated and dispersed, but triumphant. Here were many radical leaders who were not eased out after the initial battles but managed to emerge as the officials of the consolidated organizations. Their metamorphosis into

a more socially sophisticated but nonetheless authentic breed of business unionist administrators, paralleling on a national scale the evolution of the Socialist clothing union leaders in the twenties, is compelling evidence that, regardless of their initial ideologies, unions have exhibited a tropistic response to the atmospheric pressures in American society. It has lent plausibility to the smug assurance that there is nothing so effective as burdening a person with a little responsibility to cure him of his radicalism. It is true that some high labor officials have resisted the conservatizing trend, but it is also true that these officials have not survived.

We have no need to follow recent fashionable writers in their hunt for metaphysical or occult explanations for this American exceptionalism. The explanations that have already been worked out—centering around the lushness of the country, the relative class mobility, the waves of immigration and heterogeneity of the population, the weakness of class consciousness—adequately cover the case. No new explanations are necessary. Indeed, they cannot be found. In the early movement of the 1830s, the employers often argued against shorter hours or other improvements by explaining that it was not in their employees' true interests to make such demands since the journeymen would soon be setting up shops of their own and would consequently be burdened with uneconomic costs. Until well past the Civil War period, the labor movement could not build stable unions because the mechanics thought their situation to be a transient one. William H. Sylvis, the greatest labor leader of his time, was an exemplar of resourcefulness and indefatigability in building his Molders Union and responsible for the organization of many other unions. But he believed that trade unions were only temporary protective devices whose more important purpose was the setting up of producers' cooperatives to beat the wage system.

American labor history has been one of the most violent of the whole world. Goaded beyond endurance, workers would rise up every fifteen to twenty years. But the system was never in danger. The variegated composition of the American people ensured that the uprising affected but a segment of the nation. The growth of the middle classes stunted the numerous labor parties that repeatedly dotted the landscape. The extreme left organizations were kept to small minority affairs. The stormy expansion of American capitalism,

thwarted by no feudalistic obstructions, and with a virgin continent to ravage, permitted the doling out of material privileges. The mass movement, in defeat or victory, would inevitably lapse into acquiescence.

It was only as late as 1890 that the labor movement could free itself from the allure of middle-class panaceas. The workers had to experiment with countless cooperative, money, and single-tax schemes before they were ready for the hard-headed message of Sam Gompers. It is ironical that the carriers of this hundred-percent American trade union gospel should have been ex-Marxian socialists, a number of them immigrants who derived from Marx their ideas about the inevitability of capitalist development and the impossibility of circumventing the wage system through cooperative self-employment ventures or anti-monopolist crusades, and who carried over from their socialist days the doctrine of class divisions and class interests. It is not the first time in the record of history that the outsider displays a keener sensitivity than the insider to the deep-going trends of a society.

With the AFL we first had a clearly defined class organization with specific class purposes. But in resting upon the most conscious and disciplined section of the working class of the time—the skilled craftsmen—the organization brought into the labor movement, in addition to continuity and stability, the inevitable conservatism associated with the labor aristocracy. The American craftsman was more labor conscious than the generality of the labor mass, but his consciousness was of the narrow job variety far removed from the Marxist vision of a labor solidarity crossing the barriers of parochial trade and shop limitations. The outlook of the craftsmen produced pure-and-simple trade unionism, not Marxian laborism.

The years from 1890 to 1930 when the AFL dominated the labor scene were the very years in which the premises of craft unionism were being systematically undermined. Enormous capital accumulations confronted the badly divided craft unions with formidable trusts and combines that they could not successfully cope with. The harnessing of science by the emergent economic behemoths progressively revolutionized technology and destroyed old skills based upon a simpler division of labor. The restricted kingdoms founded on trade jurisdiction, protecting the fortunate few through closed shop arrangements, became a unionism restricted to the interstices and certain traditional preserves in the system, with the largest part of the working class left out of the game. The growing trustification of the economy narrowed opportunities for newcomers and reduced mobility on even the lowest levels. This remained the wealthiest capitalism with the highest living standards. But the process of "Europeanization" was far advanced.

It took the working class several decades to attune its mentality to the new facts and to perfect organizations able to do something about them. An oppressed class can generally respond to social stimuli only after a considerable time interval when the same needs are evoked in one after another layer of the people and lead to a common solidarity of purpose. A vast conglomeration of humanity can create organizations and produce leaders to deal intelligently with a complex social mechanism only after repeated trials and errors. But new techniques were finally devised, new organizations built, and new leaders came up and grappled with the new realities of the giant corporation and the assembly line. And as we know, the heroism and daring of the thirties gave birth to superb mass organizations—which soon went in for a more grandiose variety of business unionism!

We are far from the belief that leaders invariably interpret accurately the wishes of the ranks. The relationship between the two is an infinitely complicated one. There are times when a leadership breaks off its dialogue with the ranks, and because of the difficulties in breaking through any bureaucratic mesh, and the time-lag and inertia in human affairs, there may be a lapse of years before the ranks can right the imbalance. But the relapse into business unionism was not a case of that kind. Given the mentality of the American labor mass, it was as inevitable as Gompers' triumph in 1890.

8. Consciousness of Kind

Where does that leave the socialist dream? According to Daniel Bell and a thousand others, it leaves it in the ditch:

> In American radical folklore, the auto worker was considered the seedling of the indigenous class conscious radical—if there ever was to be one in America. Uninhibited, rootless

(many were recruited from the Ozark hills), with his almost nihilistic temper he was the raw stuff for revolutionary sentiment —once he realized (or so the Marxists thought) that he was trapped by his job. Few auto workers today have a future beyond their job. Few have a chance of social advancement. But they are not radical. What has happened is that the old goals have been displaced and the American Dream has been given a new gloss. . . . A worker sees himself "getting ahead" . . . not by promotion in the plant—he knows that *that* ladder has vanished, even though Henry Ford and Walter P. Chrysler began from the mechanics' bench—but because he is working toward a "nice little modern house" . . . dissatisfactions on the job lead not to militancy, despite occasional sporadic outbursts, but to escapist fantasies. . . . (Daniel Bell, *Work and Its Discontents,* Boston, 1956, pp. 32-33.)

None of this is untrue and yet it provides but a surface view of what is taking place. A static view encompasses but one side of a complex social reality and is therefore an inadequate view. Anti-Marxists are after all no more entitled than Marxists to ignore the dynamic flow, to assume that time has stopped with them. Conservative the working class certainly is—but there is conservatism and conservatism. It would be fatuous to compare the working class of 1950 with that of 1910 and pretend that nothing has changed except a few frills and superficialities; or to maintain that it is still in the grip of a slightly altered American Dream. As a matter of fact, Ely Chinoy's very study of the automobile worker that Bell uses to make his case, explodes the thesis.

The fact that workers are interested in having a "nice little modern house" does not prove very much one way or the other—except possibly that sinful man thirsts for material things and is avid for creature comforts. Greater insight would be gained by analyzing what social relations he establishes and what lines of conduct he embarks on in order to get his little house. The wide acceptance of unionism as a natural and necessary feature of the working man's life; the forging of an authentic labor bloc in politics; the fatalistic acceptance by the generality of workers of their class position on the social ladder and the effort to make the best of the bargain *as a workingman*; the cohesiveness, discipline, and stability of labor's mass organizations over a period of twenty years—these are sure symptoms of a deep-rooted labor consciousness transcending by far the

Gompers job consciousness of limited groups of skilled mechanics, or the evanescent bursts of militancy of a swirling, chaotic mass which would sink into exhaustion and demoralization as rapidly as it had flared into rebellion. This "consciousness of kind," as J. B. S. Hardman has shrewdly defined it, uncannily resembles what socialists have traditionally meant by "class consciousness" in its appreciation of labor's common interests and the need for solidarity of action for self-protection and self-advancement. But it is far removed from the Marxian notion in its other half: its acceptance of the liberal rationale as a correct image of the existing social machinery and as an acceptable philosophy to guide labor's progress.

From the point of view of Marxian anticipations and ambitions, this is a very disappointing state of affairs, as labor seems to be largely wasting the huge powers inherent in its organizations, and is not much of a mover and shaker in the ordering of the national weal. Considered as a class that has been anointed with the holy petroleum to reorganize society, American labor makes a decidedly uninspiring appearance at present. But from the viewpoint of a submerged and deprived class, which until the CIO days was never permitted to enter the nation's parlor even if it was somewhat better fed down in the kitchen than its fellow menials of other lands, it may appear as if some appreciable progress has been made. If we can grasp the dynamics of the process, this will give us a better insight than any amount of fussing over the exact formulations which pinpoint most accurately labor's current outlook, or more correctly, its apathy.

In his earlier more fruitful days, Frank Tannenbaum explained that the labor movement is the reaction to industrial society (*The Labor Movement, Its Conservative Functions and Social Consequences,* New York, 1921, p. 32): The machine threatens the security of the individual worker and he reacts in self-defense. Through a union he tries to control the machine and stem the tide of insecurity which menaces his life. He is seeking little more when he joins a union, but "in the process of carrying out the implications of defense against the competitive character of the capitalist system he contributes to the rebuilding of present-day society—a contribution which represents a by-product of the more immediate and conscious attempt to find security in an insecure world." Tannenbaum, when he

wrote this book, thought that the ultimate displacement of capitalism by "industrial democracy" was "implicit in the growth and development of the organized labor movement."

Students of the labor movement will attest to the cogency of at least the first part of Tannenbaum's observations. The labor movement reflects—at times more accurately, at times less accurately, but generally speaking with a measure of fidelity—the aspirations, going moods, wills and wishes of its individual members. But like all mass movements it is more than the arithmetical sum of its individual parts. The consciousness of power, the electrifying action of one part upon the other, gives the movement a corporative character with horizons and aspirations greater than those of its individual human atoms. The accumulation of actions in the contest with capital have a logic that goes beyond its avowed aims and carries a momentum that is sometimes of greater significance than the conscious designs of its architects. If it is true generally in the social sphere that things take place behind people's backs, it is doubly true in the case of the labor movement. For the labor movement operates with a formal ideology that is at loggerheads with its own practices.

Sophisticated conservatives understand this dynamic aspect that is inherent in the labor movement very well.* But it used to be generally taken for granted that labor would remain docile, or in the language of the philistines, "realistic," and suffer constant losses of its youngest and most virile elements, because of the existence of a wide frontier of opportunity—the sure substance of the American Dream that the lowliest and the poorest could with the outlay of energy and the exercise of intelligence move up on the ladder of social position and economic enrichment. This optimistic faith is no longer there. It is of interest to note that Daniel Bell, like so many other current ideologists, no longer relies on this relatively solid material foundation for the maintenance of conservatism, but rests his case on installment-buying sorcery and hoopla. The spokesmen of the New Right are cynical about the American Dream. And they know the

* Current industrial disputes, the editors of *Business Week* have said, are not "a series of isolated battles for isolated gains. Rather, they are part of a long-term, irrepressible struggle for power." (March 29, 1941.)

wage earners don't believe in it any longer.*

But they have found an easy way out of the dilemma by extrapolating the fifties into an endless future: wage and salary earners will continue purchasing TV sets, automobiles, and little homes on credit. The shiny new toys will continue to keep them bemused and preoccupied. They will occasionally blow off steam, but this will not come to much since the worker accepts the same premises as the corporation president; namely, individualism and private property. The New Economists have freed themselves from the millstone of a balanced budget and have declared that it makes no difference how high a state pyramids its national debt; and the new breed of sociologists have freed themselves from the American Dream as the source of mass attachment to capitalism, and think that the trick can be

* See Ely Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream,* Garden City, N. Y., 1955. In this remarkable study, Chinoy concludes, after an exhaustive investigation, that the automobile worker gives up taking the dream seriously at a very early point in his life. The author shows that the dream has little validity, and believes that it probably never had much validity even in the past.

He says: "There has also been increasing evidence that Americans have tended to interpret the past more in terms of folklore than of facts, that opportunities for vertical mobility were never as great as generally assumed and therefore could not have declined very much. William Miller has shown, for example, that the Horatio Alger sagas had little relationship to the careers of those who were the American business elite in 1900, that is, those who began their careers about 1870. The 'safety valve theory' which saw the frontier as an outlet for ambitious and dissatisfied urban workers has been shown to have little historical validity. The steadily increasing dominance of big business has tended to obscure the fact that the proportion of independent businessmen has remained relatively constant for the past sixty years and that the rate of failure among entrepreneurs has probably always been very high. What has appeared to some as a decline in opportunity may be merely a progressive awakening from an illusion created by the nation's extraordinary economic growth."

Chinoy and other scholars are performing a great service in debunking the Horatio Alger myths that have become imbedded in our history. Some of them may be going to the other extreme when they cast doubt on any progressive hardening of social lines. It would seem that the growing monopolization of the economy further constricts the lower layers. Even the professionals of the new middle classes, whose living standards may be formally superior to those of their counterparts of sixty years ago, have lost the independence of movement and social weight of their forebears.

turned just as satisfactorily with credit buying and gadgets. In the ideological as well as in the economic market place, the true conservative, who had faith in the stability and progress of the system, has been displaced by the nimble-fingered gambler who is sure that he can somehow keep on juggling things successfully.

The argument is sometimes given plain, and the argument is sometimes given fancy with statistics or learned quotations. Either way it represents the abdication of reason in favor of the boomer's logic that we have done fine up to now and hence we will continue to do all right. It has been said that faith moves mountains. It has also been said that in the face of sublime faith, reason must take a back seat. But what if Ecclesiastes was wrong when he thought there was nothing new under the sun? What if the social animal proceeds, in the manner of biological species, along an evolutionary line of progress?

9. An Epoch of Crises

Writing the fourth volume of the Commons labor history at the time of the Great Depression, Selig Perlman and Philip Taft tossed in at the end a fugitive paragraph which, unbeknownst to the authors, placed a question mark over a great area of their apologia for business unionism and the *status quo*. They said:

> In the future . . . should the present depression turn into a chronic one, a development far from unthinkable, the very job consciousness of American unionism is likely to lead it to the espousal of government management of some industries, in order to take up the slack in unemployment. But this would happen not because unionism had gone over to the belief in a predetermined social evolution towards socialism, nor because it had come to condemn the profit system as immoral in itself, but on the pragmatic ground that the unemployed must be re-employed —by the government if private industry fails to do it. (Commons, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, p. 625.)

If we ignore the polemic against our familiar friend, the straw man (as if any one believed that a people turn against an entrenched and time-hallowed social system except through their own life experiences and conclusions!) we are at the nub of the matter. If man's social consciousness is in the long run conditioned by his economic and political environment, if the actions he pursues and the institutions he devises represent attempts to master the blind social forces that govern his life and being, then the drift of the labor movement ought to be ascertainable from an analysis of the evolution of our society in this second half of the twentieth century. This is all the truer since labor unionism is a child of social stress and strain and reacts like the most sensitive of barometers to the public climate.

If we can construe the trends of present-day American capitalism as consistent with an image of relative social stability and economic well-being, or even with a continuation for the next two or three decades of an internal equilibrium balanced on a knife's edge —the story of the fifties—then we can envisage a labor movement in the continuing grip of conformity; then even flareups or strike waves can represent but momentary tests of strength to ascertain the precise ground for readjustment within an enfolding harmony. What if we get a virtually opposite reading from the chart? Some of its components include: 1) An annual 3½ to 4 percent rise in productivity in the last decade, with far more substantial increases in manufacturing, as against a possible 2½ percent rise in hourly wages; 2) an economy that is again showing a strong tendency to stagnation although resting on a war budget in the neighborhood of 15 percent of the national income; 3) the competition of a rival social system which is admittedly growing far more rapidly than capitalism; 4) the strategy of the United States to maintain the imperial system in the face of a burgeoning nationalism in Asia and Africa; 5) the implacable cold war between United States-led Western capitalism and the Soviet bloc.

Of course, it is not given to man to pierce the veil of the future, even the immediate future, in its empirical unfoldment. But some broad tendencies can be foreseen. It is a truism that we are living in an age of change although it is less clear what is on the other side of the divide. For the immediate purposes of this discussion, the prediction can be ventured that the precarious equilibrium of the fifties will be broken within another decade or less through the accumulation of internal and external tensions. We can anticipate disillusionment and exasperation because of recurring economic stagna-

tion and slumps.* We can envisage waves of restlessness sweeping over the nation as a result of the dislocations brought on by "small wars" that are apparently due to remain a feature of our epoch. The repeated disruption of settled modes of existence will rend the fabric of social stability and produce a new political convulsion. Whatever refinements or amendments may be in order in this projection, it is social crisis, not Victorian serenity, that is in store for our nation in the days ahead.

When this labor army of 17½ million finds itself inside a flaming arena of political upheaval, it will lead to a shakeup of its present leadership, and provoke a more ambitious lunge to make government serve the common man's needs. May not the movement again settle down after a brief spurt of accomplishment, to yet another modified version of a business unionism? Possibly. Even probably. But we must recognize that the past cycles of explosion have not merely repeated themselves unchangingly like Pareto's circulation of elites. There has been an evolutionary line of progress. The line is not one of smooth ascent. The curve moves down as well as up. There are long stretches of years when it scarcely moves at all. Sometimes gains in organization or material benefits lead to losses in intellectual audacity. But overall there is an upward sweep. From 1886 to 1936 the transformation is enormous in labor's self-confidence, sustained solidarity, and organizational prowess.

The aims of every period of insurgency are set by the whole preceding development of mass consciousness, and each movement pursues those goals which recommend themselves to its participants as both necessary and realizable. If we are mindful that the tempo of change is slow in a rich and comparatively stable society, we would not go far wrong in charting our estimate that the next eruption, arising out of the popular need to gain control over the levers of government to ensure economic growth and to reorient our foreign relationships if we are to mitigate the risks of annihilating war, will most likely move close to what can be called in general terms a mildly socialistic or British Labor Party type of program. Whether this ought to be interpreted as a stage toward a cooperative commonwealth, or represents still another pragmatic adaptation within a liberal context to the mass society of our time, will depend on one's transcendental view of the drift of our civilization.

There are some aware of the dynamism of the social process and convinced of the superficiality of the current stability, who nevertheless fear that there is more likelihood of a victory for the extreme Right issuing out of any coming upheavals than a labor-liberal advance.* They speak of the victories of fascist and military dictators over labor movements in Europe, and they call attention to the obvious unpreparedness and absence of leadership in the American union movement for a contest of that caliber. It would take us too far afield to pursue the matter here at any length. A few more or less didactic propositions will have to suffice.

Capitalism operates most cheaply and efficaciously under a parliamentary or semi-parliamentary system. Capitalists never prefer military adventurers or fascist freebooters except when social conflicts endanger their regime. Dictatorial movements of the Right never seize governmental power except with the connivance of at least important segments of the moneyed oligarchy. Periods of acute social crises are invariably accompanied by the flowering or at least existence of threatening anti-capitalist labor movements. For a variety of reasons,

* Emil Mazey, Auto Union Secretary-Treasurer, was reported in *Ford Facts* (March 29, 1958) to have made these remarks to a meeting of the Detroit Ford local membership: "He stated that it must be recognized that unemployment was a built-in feature in our present economic system. Quoting Elliott Bell, editor and publisher of *Business Week* . . . he said that in the past 25 years there had been a business slump every four years, each slump averaging two years. He felt there was something basically wrong with an economic system that breaks down as frequently as ours does, with these recurring periods of unemployment that breed frustration, fear, poverty and broken homes, and it was time that something was done to correct the things that were wrong."

A recent volume by a Yale professor that has gained attention (William Fellner, *Trends and Cycles in Economic Activity,* New York, 1956) contains this declaration, given as a truism of our times: "Probably the most uncontroversial statement that can be made . . . is that extended periods of substantial unemployment have become intolerable. If periods of this sort should recur, the private enterprise system would be very unlikely to survive."

* See Adolph Sturmthal, *The Tragedy of European Labor,* New York, 1943. While the solution that the author presents differs little from the policy he excoriates, he describes with impressive detail how time and again strong European labor movements, in the grip of "pressure group" outlooks, lacked the program to unite the nation for progressive ends in periods of storm and stress and consequently succumbed to reaction.

it appears that the social conflict is developing in this country at a slow enough pace so that the next movement of insurgency will be confined to the arena of quasi-parliamentary politics and trade union struggles. Naturally, the question is not disposed of by black-and-white demarcations. Our age has shown that the dividing line between democracy and dictatorship is shifting and variable; and it is incontestable that in a conflict, labor can lose as well as win. All the more reason why the re-equipping of the labor movement with the program, outlook, strategy, and alliances that are required to cope with the dangers, as well as to make use of the opportunities of our epoch, stands as a top priority for the realization of beneficial social advances.

III

10. The Politics of Drift

Labor's going policies originated during the New Deal and are an adaptation to the relationships of that period. But they lack viability for the solution of any one of the immediate major challenges now confronting labor, whether it is the need to halt the anti-labor offensive, or an organization drive to enroll some of the key divisions of the still unorganized majority of the working class, or to break into the South.

Labor's mammoth structure buttresses all the tendencies to conservatism and discourages all innovations which appear increasingly as unwarranted risk-taking. On the other hand, as the labor movement grows bigger and its social weight increases, it becomes proportionately more, not less, dependent on large social forces and cannot successfully confine itself to "pressure group" techniques. Endless palavers about labor-management harmony of interests do not gainsay the

fact that the labor movement is a disturbing element within capitalist society, and the larger and stronger it becomes the more it tends to upset the equilibrium. Unions can be as reasonable as sweet charity and headed by the most impeccable of free enterprisers. They are always a source of irritation. They are sometimes a source of danger. No matter how dictatorial the labor leader gets, or how much distance he tries to put between himself and his ranks, he cannot free himself too much too long from the wishes of his constituents. If he does, there is always the possibility that he may be displaced by another leadership with a more radical turn of mind; or that his members will lose their minimal loyalties and the organization will disintegrate. That is one reason why employers do not make peace with the unions. They simply grant truces subject to periodic renewal.

The "pressure group" psychology did not work effectively even in Gompers' day. When the AFL was peppered with court injunctions and damage suits after the 1904 employers' offensive, or when the trade union bureaucracy was swallowed up in Wilson's war machine in 1917, Gompers' much-touted "voluntarism" became more of a catchword to beat down radical opponents at AFL conventions than a legitimate description of the AFL program. But whatever its uses and values in the hazy, far-away, almost semi-mythical world that existed prior to World War I—and it had some—it is an anachronism at present when labor unions are up to their necks, or as one writer put it, "down to their knees," in politics.

It served limited purposes in the thirties when the climate was progressive. But in this decade of gathering reaction, the policy of drift has led to adaptation to reaction in national affairs, and retreat before reaction in trade union affairs. What happens in practice is that the labor leaders seek sustenance by clutching at the coattails of the liberals. But the liberals are engulfed by the reactionary tide and are making peace with the moderate conservatives. These, in turn, are in retreat before the extreme Right. The unions consequently find themselves buffeted this way and that by forces which are not of their making and which are beyond their reach. They are condemned to be a plaything of forces which others initiate and control. At best, the policy serves to blunt the edge of the attack and slow down the retreat. But it cannot reverse the tide.

Labor's current coalition does not challenge the essential distribution of political power. In effect, it accepts it, but by means of its political alliances it succeeds at times in altering subsidiary decisions, in wangling second-rate concessions, in participating on the lower levels of patronage handouts, and in deflecting the more extreme anti-labor excursions of political carpetbaggers. The policy can be described as a holding operation, and not an exceptionally successful one at that. Labor indeed needs alliances with other sectors of the population. This aspect of the break with Gompersism is thoroughly sound. But it would seem that in any meaningful alliances, labor should wield its proper proportionate influence, and the alliance should be the instrumentality to battle for necessary improvements and changes rather than immobilizing its main participant.

The union administrators recognize no alternative to the present course as they have gotten lost in technical difficulties. They argue that before a new party can even be contemplated, the labor people have to be enrolled in the union political action setups, they have to be trained to register faithfully, this and that bloc that is presently quiescent will have to be activized, etc., etc. "You have to learn to crawl before you can walk." They believe, as a matter of fact, that as labor perfects its political action techniques, "at the grass roots levels," it will be in a position to realize many of its present goals.

Clearly, the argument has some validity. A certain amount of progress can be made under the present ground rules by doorbell ringing, organizational push, and administrative coordination. But after limited advances, the whole process necessarily and repeatedly grinds to a halt. And for obvious reasons. The politics of the electoral campaigns are determined by the Democratic machines. They set the tone, fix the scope, provide the content, if any. As the politics of 99 percent of the Democratic candidates is water-logged at best, and indistinguishable from the Republicans at worst, the amount of excitement that unions can generate among their members is strictly rationed. The policy works most successfully in localized instances when unionists can be aroused to defeat a particularly obnoxious candidate or unusually wretched bill. But fifteen years of pressure politics have failed to alter the contour of American politics. What is even worse, they have been insufficient for labor to hold its own.

The unprecedented boom going back to 1941 has lent plausibility to an otherwise bankrupt game. The temper of the leadership being what it is, it can be surmised that it will take an unusual jolt before there is any change of course. The most progressive of the officials, like Emil Mazey of the Auto Union, say they still think a labor party is the right thing, but "now is not the time." Walter Reuther, who as late as 1943 was giving behind-the-scenes encouragement to the Michigan Commonwealth Federation, has since become converted to the "realism" that a labor party has no place in the American scene. Other more conservative leaders consider the very question to be a form of screwballism. The chorus of the leaders is all but unanimous, and the ranks either agree or are too bewildered to have any specific opinions. A policy of retreat sets up moods of apathy in the ranks which in turn reinforce and are used to justify the policy. We are in a vicious circle. It appears that the politics of drift are destined to continue until they hit the shoals of crisis; and that means that the retreat will not be reversed for the spell ahead.

But it is almost inconceivable that this tired worldly wisdom can survive a crisis. While times are good, conflicts can continue to be sidetracked and contradictory claims can be papered over with flimsy solutions, with the unions veering and tacking and warding off the worst of the blows leveled at them. But in times of social stress, this labor leviathan will be thrust willy-nilly into the center of the social arena, and the ground will quake under "muddling through" strategies. The alliance within the Democratic Party is of the kind which will crack the moment the labor leaders are under pressures to make significant social demands. Whether a new party will be formed in roughly the way the British party got started, or whether a large part of the Democratic Party (which the old Populists used to call the whore of American politics) will get overhauled to form a bastardized sort of labor-liberal party is of course impossible to foresee. Because of this country's past mobility, and the cynicism of its folkways, its politics have always been extraordinarily opportunistic, even by European standards. (The story is told that the Tammany Hall boss, Charles F. Murphy, when informed in the twenties of the large vote that the Socialist Party had received in one of the working-class districts, said: "We don't need a Socialist Party. If the people of New York want socialism, then Tammany Hall will give it to

them.") But through one means or another (although we are inclined to exclude Tammany Hall as a possibility) the contours of American politics are due for modification. Until that time, labor's political position will remain precarious.

11. The Challenge of the South

The most important slogan of the trade union Left in the twenties was the call for the organization of the unorganized. With the unionization of the main mass production industries, the demand has lost some of its edge, but union growth remains a most sensitive gauge of the morale of the labor movement. Its phenomenal progress since 1934 notwithstanding, the American union movement remains behind most of the European countries in the extent of its organization. The fact that a theoretical two thirds of wage and salary earners are outside the fold testifies to its still limited dynamism. The penetration ratios, as estimated by Leo Wolman for 1947, showed 52 percent in all manufacturing, 62 percent in transportation, communication, and public utilities, 75 percent in building construction, 84 percent in mining, quarrying, and oil—but only 9 percent in services and 12 percent in public employment. A more recent estimate calculated about 10 percent of department store employees as organized, and only 7 percent of all retail. Moreover, certain industries, like textiles and chemical, are still largely untouched, while the South remains a haven of the runaway plant, the open shop, and the lower wage differential.

The constant changes in the economy necessitate constant new organization if the labor movement is to maintain its grip. In recent years, for instance, there has taken place the multiplication of white collar workers, the steady movement of plants in certain industries into the South, the decentralization of operations, and the building of new rationalized plants in new communities. The unions can soon find their strength ebbing away unless they keep step with economic transformations. They are presently not making any significant inroads into the main unorganized fields: white collar, trade and service, small communities, and the South.

The theory is popular in some quarters that labor's growth is a thing of the past. A recent college text states, "In the United States, the 'heroic period' of union founding is over." (Melvin W. Reder, *Labor in a Growing Economy,* New York, 1957, p. 518.) Daniel Bell has argued that the easy stuff is all organized and that "organized labor has probably passed its peak strength." (*Fortune,* April 1953, p. 204.) One might counter by pointing out that what is easy stuff is not a constant. Automobile workers were untouchable in 1927 and unstoppable in 1937. National Guardsmen shot at pickets at the Auto-Lite strike in Toledo in 1934, and a year and a half later some of them were marching the picket line back in their home town in Defiance, Ohio. The office secretary who has a nameplate on her desk and dreams of marrying the junior executive across the hall might be fairly immune to the lures of unionism this year, and feel very differently about it next year after she has been worked over by automation.

There is this much validity, however, to Bell's thesis: if we take the present social climate as unchangeable, unions are not going to make any noteworthy advances. Good planning and aggressive staff work can of course enroll many thousands even today. The Teamsters have shown resourcefulness and militancy of a *condottiere* variety in organizing. The Packinghouse Union has been successful in a number of hard-fought strikes. Even the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, according to its reports, signed up 69,000 new members in 1957. But for a basic breakthrough into new fields, aggressive staff work is not enough. A political and social shift has to pave the way for organization. The major groups that now stand outside the unions, like white collar and professional workers, or workers in the South, are inhibited from joining unions by age-long stubborn prejudices—in the case of the first, middle-class snobbery, in the case of the second, Jim Crow and Scissorbill attitudes. To make massive inroads into these redoubts of resistance, it will take nothing less than a social crusade in the course of which the fierce prejudices can be melted down, or at least allayed. The challenge of the South points up the problem.

The South is the Sicily of the United States. The territory reeks with race prejudice and is sick with the diseases of social decay. It is in the grip of a Bourbon cabal which has fashioned white supremacy

into a flaming issue to perpetuate its own regional rule and its disproportionate power on the national scene. While this oligarchy remains in the saddle, it will make a mockery of labor's political aspirations, and in many instances threaten the union's wage scales. Until the South is overhauled socially to conform to at least the Northern pattern, it will drag down any attempts at a liberal reorganization of government. High on the agenda—if not at the very top—to reverse the present tide of reaction stands the unfinished work of cleansing these Augean stables of particularism and backwardness.

Were unionism to become as effective in the South as it is in the Midwest, the precondition would exist for the replacement of its present anachronistic social arrangements. But all attempts to organize the South by means of routine trade union methods have either broken on the rock of entrenched reaction or disintegrated under the debilitating social climate. Even when the CIO was marching through the country with seven league boots, its textile organization campaign was one of its least successful ventures, with very little showing made in the South. Overall union membership in 1938 in eleven Southern states (excluding Texas, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) probably numbered no more than 450,000. After the war, the CIO made a major effort to open up the South, and the AFL followed suit as well. Philip Murray announced with great fanfare to the Auto Union convention in March 1946 that a million dollars was going to be collected for a Southern drive and that 200 skilled organizers were going into the field. "There is no other instrumentality that I know of anywhere in America," he proclaimed, "that seems quite so capable of performing that task as the Congress of Industrial Organizations. . . . You remember we started this crusade in the North just ten years ago, and now we are going into the South. . . . Thank God we have an institution that can go into the South—the CIO." (*Proceedings of the Tenth UAW Convention,* Atlantic City, 1946, pp. 100-101.)

The publicity handouts read impressively, and the *CIO News* boasted on November 15, 1948, that the "organizing committee had added 900 new locals and 450,000 new members to the CIO rolls since Operation Dixie began." The AFL reported that it had signed up a quarter of a million new members. But *Fortune* magazine was unfortunately closer to the truth when it stated in its October 1948

number: "The CIO Southern drive, now grinding to a halt, may be taken over by the Textile Workers Union, which has been supplying most of the funds and organizers. Gains apart from textiles have brought in only dribs and drabs of woodworkers and furniture workers, and other odd lots." (p. 150.) As for the Textile Union, its achievements were likewise less than satisfactory. Its 1946 convention records revealed that it then had only 125 contracts covering 67,000 workers in the South. The union's research director, Solomon Barkin, made this flat summary of the results of CIO's Operation Dixie: "The drive made no real headway in the textile industry." (*International Labor Review,* May 1957, p. 401.)

Another expert on Southern labor, Frank T. De Vyver, came to the conclusion that "rosy predictions made at the start of the campaign have not been attained. The great Cannon Mill and Avondale chains, two prime objectives, still are unorganized. The furniture and lumber industries have barely been touched, and there are other announced objectives which have not been attained." (*Southern Economic Journal,* July 1949, p. 3.) Not to put too fine an embroidery on it, the campaign was an abysmal failure. A report on the Southern textile industries issued by the Senate read: "Millions of dollars have been spent for organizing by the unions since the end of World War II, and yet Mr. Emil Rieve, President of the TWU-CIO, testified before the subcommittee that membership in his union in the South had declined from 20 percent of the textile employees to 15 percent in the last few years." (Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, *Hearings,* 82nd Congress, 2nd Session, 1951, p. 362.)

The CIO campaign in the thirties erupted as a more or less spontaneous affair in which serried ranks were not afraid to convert a trade union organization campaign into a social uprising. The Southern drive of the CIO by contrast was a tight-fisted bureaucratic show where middle-aged business agents, taking a leaf out of William Green's Southern drive of 1929, thought to slip into the South unobtrusively by double-talking around the race question and reassuring all and sundry of the unassailable respectability of the organized labor movement. It didn't work. Ordinary trade union techniques could not break through the tangled skein of race hatreds, small

town provincialism, backwoods prejudices, and the militant opposition of the government-employer alliance.

The Senate subcommittee report described in lurid detail what unionism is up against in the South. Here are a few excerpts from the findings:

> Self-organization and collective bargaining (in the Southern textile industry) are steadily losing ground. The retreat of union organization is being compelled by employer campaigns on an area-wide front. Much of this campaign is being conducted in shocking violation of the Labor-Management Relations Act, and the National Labor Relations Board appears to be powerless to cope with the situation. . . . Employers will use some or all of the following methods: surveillance of organizers and union adherents; propaganda through rumours, letters, news stories, advertisements; organization of the whole community for anti-union activity; labor espionage; discharge of union sympathizers; violence and gun play; injunctions; the closing or moving of the mill; endless litigation before the NLRB and the courts, etc. If all this fails, the employers will try to stall, in slow succession, first the election, then the certification of the union, and finally, the negotiation of a contract. Few organizing campaigns survive this type of onslaught. . . .
>
> Where unions have managed to get formed, the employers then go to work to bust the union: the grievance procedure is broken down; the disgruntled workers are urged by management to revoke the check-off of dues; union representatives are denied access to the plant; union leaders are fired. This may be called the softening-up process. When the contract comes up for renegotiation, impossible demands are made; negotiations drag on interminably; employees are propagandized on the unreasonable attitude of union negotiators; expiration of the contract forces a strike; injunction is secured; strikers are hailed for contempt; a back-to-work movement is started; fights are precipitated; workers are evicted from homes in the mill village; peace officers harass the strikers; the National Guard is called out; loans to union members are called in; credit is stopped; ministers urge return to work; the strike collapses under this conjunction of economic, physical, moral and religious pressure; returning employees are refused employment; blacklists block employment in other mills. If the strike cannot be broken, the plant can be closed and machinery transferred to another mill or sold. (*Ibid,* pp. 55, 60, 64.)

This is an updating of well-known union-busting techniques exposed by the La Follette Committee in 1937. But for all their revelation of ruthlessness and brutality, they leave out two elements that make the South a unique problem: racism and the one-party state. It is these two which lend to traditional employer anti-unionism its special invincibility and keep those unions that have gained a foothold on the thin edge of legality. Southern local governments often resemble those of company towns in pre-New Deal days. And race hatred, which at one and the same time is the necessity and justification for the dictatorial system, has infected, with scattered honorable exceptions, the whole of the white community, and remains a deadly agent in blocking and disrupting union organization.* Here is a deeply imbedded abscess which will respond only to thoroughgoing social therapy. Yet the prerequisites exist for a successful labor offensive and even in terms of the South's own experience, the specific manifestations of the disease have been shown to be manageable.

Despite the official outcry against unionism as a foreign and subversive importation, Southern unions made progress during the war years when the Northern unions were growing apace. Southern membership, which was less than half a million in 1938, was estimated around the million mark ten years later. Texas, which has been industrializing very rapidly for the past two decades and which has had an influx of many good-sized plants belonging to national concerns that are unionized, has experienced union growth in manufacturing, railroading, telephone and telegraph, transit, and interstate trucking. In 1953, it was estimated that its total union membership was just under a fifth of all nonagricultural workers. Bureau of Labor Statistics community wage surveys for 1953-1954 showed the following percentage of manufacturing plant workers covered by union

---

* "Today, throughout the South, thousands of men and women who work in textile mills at below-standard wages, in below-standard conditions, vote against unions because they are showered with racist propaganda of the lowest kind." (Harvey Swados, *Nation,* July 5, 1958.)

Only recently, the CIO Electrical Union was defeated at the Neco Company in Bay Springs, Mississippi, when the company circulated a photograph of the union president, James B. Carey, shown dancing with a colored woman (who happened to be an African delegate to a meeting of the International Labor Organization).

contracts in leading Southern cities: Dallas, 61; New Orleans, 63; Memphis, 78; Atlanta, 57. Other surveys showed sizeable organization in Birmingham, Richmond, and Norfolk.

What we are witnessing is a complex crisscrossing of a number of contradictory tendencies which is uprooting the traditional South of the plantations and magnolia trees: growing industrialization and urbanization with attendant attempts among workers to fashion instruments of self-protection; the institutional strength of national unions trying to penetrate competitive areas, especially moving in the wake of national concerns under union contract. At the same time, the backwardness of the South acts as a magnet to attract new industries because of its large reservoir of farm labor—presumably docile and cheap—to draw upon, and its feudalistic governments which welcome the newcomer with low taxes and accommodating law-enforcement agencies. With the growth of urban society and a modern working class, the political superstructure is out of harmony with the social base. That very much overworked expression, "a society in transition," is truly applicable in the case of the South—a region rotten ripe for big social and political changes. At any rate, there is manifestly nothing in the character of the Southern working class which is inimical to unionization. Indeed, one can sweep aside all the statistics of Southern union membership and demonstrate the proposition by the CIO experience: the Southern hillbillies and crackers, when thrust into the environment of modern industry in the North, became, despite all their prejudices and ignorance, one of the mainstays of the CIO uprising in Detroit, Flint, Akron.

Race division may appear to be a more insuperable obstacle to unionization than regulation union-busting and one which can long and successfully defy the usual arguments of material self-interest. Yet there have been many union experiences right in the South which have demonstrated that when the unions courageously adhered to a clear-cut principle, the whites were led to accept, as a fact of life, Negroes working beside them with comparable union rights. The United Mine Workers has a large organization in the South and runs it successfully on non-discriminatory lines. It is true that miners are a specialized breed and that the no-Jim Crow tradition is strong in the industry. But packinghouse, rubber, auto, smelter, and tobacco locals have built up an impressive case that a non-discriminatory

policy can be practiced and that at least a reasonable degree of solidarity can be secured in union affairs.

12. Negro Unionism Since the CIO

There has been an extensive national experience built up in the past years upon which to rest judgments and conclusions. Until the New Deal, unionism was pretty much a white man's proposition. Most of the important AFL unions and Railroad Brotherhoods either barred Negroes entirely, or, where they grudgingly permitted them in, segregated them into special lodges. During World War I, probably a quarter of a million Negroes went North to man the war industries, but by the Great Depression they had been forced out of their positions and relegated to either the very hot, dirty, and heavy jobs, or to certain menial jobs traditionally reserved to them. Since the American Negro often broke into Northern industry as a strikebreaker, the bitterness between the white and black worker was further aggravated, and the attainment of labor solidarity loomed as a well-nigh hopeless goal. In the South, where Negro artisans had been firmly established through a lower wage structure, Negroes were being pushed out of the building and hand trades under the fierce competition for jobs, and unions were sometimes the vehicle to do the pushing. Inevitably, the Negro community was almost universally hostile to labor unions and understandably considered them a roadblock to Negro employment in trades and industry.

The CIO changed all that, at least in the North. Black and white solidarity—which had appeared to be another of the many quixotic utopias of radicals—came to America not imperceptibly, but with a rush. From the moment of its formation, the CIO opened its doors to all Negro workers on an equal basis. There were no constitutional bars, no segregation of the colored into separate locals, no secret Jim Crow rituals. Mindful of their sad experiences of the past, Negroes were hesitant about joining at first, but their doubts, fears, and antagonisms were overcome in the heat of the labor struggles and the CIO's demonstrations of good faith. They got drawn into the unions, and the employers' efforts to pit them against the whites

were frustrated. The pendulum began to swing in the labor direction throughout the Negro communities; and in time the Negro preachers, lawyers, doctors, and funeral parlor entrepreneurs had to swallow their prejudices and accept unionism as part of the Negro's way of life.

Like all important prizes in life, this was not won without a considerable battle. It must be appreciated that the middle-class professionals and business folk who dominate the Negro communities had been traditionally no less hostile to labor organizations than the white middle classes. Some of them thought, Uncle Tom-like, that it would do the Negro no good to fool around with organizations of dubious respectability; some distrusted all the white man's organizations and adopted an exclusive nationalist view; and some, as E. Franklin Frazier has shown, had built up a vested interest in the segregated Negro ghetto. George S. Schuyler has given a devastating account of their role throughout this heroic period in labor's history. He wrote:

> Recently I visited 35 industrial centers investigating the response of the Negro workers to the new labor unionization drive. Almost everywhere Negro workers were found to be flocking to both AFL and CIO unions in unprecedented numbers. They were functioning as officers in literally scores of unions. . . . Here at long last were color prejudices and discrimination being effectively attacked through labor association, organization and education. . . . Not in fifty years has America witnessed such interracial solidarity.
>
> But the most disheartening observation in connection with this labor revolution was the indifference, hostility and open opposition of so many "educated" Negroes holding positions of trust and leadership in their respective communities. . . . Their desertion of the struggling Negro workers in this crisis constitutes one of the most shameful chapters in our recent history. The new position Negro labor has won in the past year has been gained in spite of the old leadership. It has been won with new leadership; militant young men and women from the ranks of labor and grizzled veterans of the pick and shovel and the blast furnace. . . . Nowhere was the bulk of Negro leaders actively aiding the Negro workers upon whom they depended for a livelihood. Nowhere were the "educated classes" cooperating with the unions to aid the work of organization, save in a few notable instances, and there by only one or two individuals. Nowhere were Negro preachers opening their churches for labor meetings although they were glad to give any itinerant bush priest a "break." Here and there a preacher, lawyer, a politician or social worker was found whose aid to the workers cannot be too highly commended. But a great many more denounced the new unions as "radical," were belligerent in siding with the employers and in some instances openly recruited strikebreakers to take the jobs of the black unionists. The sentiments they expressed were invariably a rehash of the editorials in the local kept press. (*Crisis*, November 1937, p. 328.)

The struggle to accept unions can be said to have been won when the CIO finally triumphed over the Ford Motor Company, and the approximately 8,000 Negroes working at the River Rouge plant signed up with the UAW. This was a symbolic case, as Henry Ford dominated the Detroit Negro community politically, taking advantage of the fact that he was the largest single employer of Negro labor and had broken the traditional bars of the industry in his hiring policies. This epic battle to establish the union at Ford split the Negro community right down the middle, with many preachers actively engaged in recruiting strikebreakers. At the flash point, a few of the national NAACP figures and the more far-sighted local leaders stepped to the fore, broke the "back-to-work" movement then being organized, and the Negro ghetto elements were put to rout. From that time on, it was no longer popular in Negro circles to scoff at unions or ridicule union men.

The 1937 campaign was a historic climacteric in breaking down the wall between black and white labor. But despite its transcendent substance, the immediate effects were necessarily limited. The early CIO drives and strikes were waged to secure bargaining relations and improved conditions for the workers on the job. The CIO was too busy in this period fighting for its right to live to be concerned with the hiring practices of the companies. It had its hands full trying to organize the people employed by the corporations. Hence, the early CIO victories were of immediate benefit only to the Negroes already working in the mass production industries. Those discriminated against at the hiring gate, and without a job, derived no immediate advantage. As throughout the thirties unemployment was hitting the black worker far more drastically than the white, the new unionism, with all its virtues, was helpless to solve one of his most pressing needs.

Inside the CIO unions, the non-discrimination policy often looked better on paper than it actually was. Not because of any hypocrisy or double-dealing on the part of most top CIO officials, to be sure. It was simply too much to expect that ingrained prejudices of white workers could be wiped out overnight. The constitutional provisions were often circumvented or ignored; and in the South, openly flouted. The advanced CIO policy derived, after all, not from the superiority of the human material in the CIO unions as against AFL unions, but because of economic circumstances. The traditional craft union was built on the idea of creating a monopoly in a given trade, and that idea led to exclusion of Negroes, of other minority groups, of newcomers in general. The labor supply had to be kept limited. The industrial union on the contrary had to rest on solidarity, and hence was forced to battle from the first against all divisive prejudices based on craft, color, religion, or nationality. In the long run, the primacy of material interests in human affairs broke through to the point where even the most deeply-rooted of prejudices began slowly giving way under the impact of stern necessities.

Nevertheless, for an underprivileged group to raise itself to a position of equality is a long arduous business. Exploitation is never easily dislodged. Only a small start had been made. Discrimination remained the rule in employment, and Negroes continued working chiefly in the unskilled and most poorly paid divisions. The proportion of Negroes in manufacturing had grown from 6.2 percent in 1910 to 7.3 percent in 1930. By 1940, it was at the new low of 5.1 percent. The ground lost in the depression had not been regained. Robert C. Weaver wrote in his documented study: "When the defense program got under way, the Negro was only on the sidelines of American industrial life. . . . The forces of racial reaction felt that their position was secure. . . . The color caste system seemed to be firmly entrenched." (*Negro Labor,* New York, 1946, p. 15.)

The war boom which started in 1940 soon absorbed all of the available white male labor supply. By 1941, a universal cry went up for more workers to man the expanding industries and perform the thousand and one tasks necessary to keep the economy going. But in spite of the acute labor shortages, the color bars held fast, and Negroes were effectively excluded from most employment opportunities. In a number of cities, the thousands of new workers pouring in created acute difficulties because of the lack of necessary housing and transportation, yet old-time colored residents of the city were refused jobs. For many of the new jobs Negroes lacked the required skills, but in the first two years they were kept out of the defense training program.

Naturally, the Negro community was in an uproar. Everyone realized that it was now or never so far as breaking into industry was concerned. If the Negro could not find employment while the country was clamoring for labor, it was obvious that he was forever doomed to a serf status. Negro leaders protested heatedly, conferred with government officials, sent innumerable appeals—and nothing happened. Walter White wrote to John Temple Graves, the Southern journalist, that he had pleaded repeatedly with Roosevelt to do something but that the President refused, giving as his reason that "the South would rise up in protest." After considerable pressure, several government departments sent out vaguely worded letters, but the situation remained basically unchanged. Gunnar Myrdal reported in *An American Dilemma,* that (in mid-1942) Negroes made less headway in the war boom than during World War I. "In September 1941, it was ascertained that the great bulk of the war plants did not have any Negroes at all among their workers." (p. 412.)

It was painfully plain that the old methods of the middle-class leaders were getting the black workers nowhere, and that the labor movement would not take the initiative on the issue. In that hour of frustration, A. Philip Randolph, President of the AFL Pullman Porters Union, stepped forward with the proposal that 50,000 Negro workers march on Washington "to exact their rights in National Defense employment and the armed forces of the country." The idea took on like wildfire. A March-On-Washington Committee, headed by Randolph and other prominent Negro leaders, was formed and the march was officially announced for July 1, 1941. By spring, Negro communities all over the North were seething, and instead of the 50,000 called for, a minimum of 100,000 black workers were preparing to march. This militant challenge woke up the powers-that-be who felt that such a demonstration in time of war would constitute a damaging blow to national unity and the country's democratic pretensions. Finally, after much scurrying to and fro, the White House capitulated, and on June 25 Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802

prohibiting discrimination in government and defense industry. A dose of mass action, or, as in this case, the threat of it, strategically timed, accomplished what all the appeals, exhortations, begging, and fancy negotiations had failed to achieve.

After that a number of CIO unions went to bat in support of the wartime FEPC and acted with courage in stamping out the "hate strikes" that erupted. As a consequence Negroes were admitted into new departments and some of the old patterns of discrimination were breached. The CIO experience in these crucial years demonstrated that given enough push the membership can be educated to rid itself of ancient prejudices, and that up to a point at any rate the race barriers can be broken down. Gunnar Myrdal had written in 1942, "It is not even certain that the leaders of the CIO unions who are friendly to the Negroes will be able to maintain discipline respecting non-discrimination among their rank and file membership . . . . It is quite possible that they may have to face the alternative of either following the rank-and-filers' anti-Negro attitude or being exchanged for new leaders." (*op. cit.;* p. 425.) There were some instances of this kind, but they were not the rule. Even in the South, union officers were able to adhere to non-discrimination and get re-elected.

Taking advantage of favorable social circumstances, Negro mass pressure when allied with progressive unionism was able to change the pattern of Negro employment in the North. The Negro now has positions of strength that he lacked twenty years ago. The CIO, in this field as in others, redeemed the good name of unionism and made possible the visualization of Negro-white solidarity as a practical strategy. Compared to the old AFL, with its unashamed discriminatory provisions, an immense distance has been traveled. This stands as an illustration of what can be done. Of course, the accomplishment should not be exaggerated. Although the color caste system has been dented, it has not been eliminated by half. Negro living standards rose in the decade after 1940, but as Walter Reuther reported, "By 1950, in the absence of federal FEPC and amidst increased practices of discrimination at the hiring gate, minority groups were slowly but surely being pushed back to their pre-war earnings and employment status." Once the wartime breakthrough was over, equality within unions had also fallen into a rigidly rationed schema.

13. A Stalled Engine

In the South, the racist front is totalitarian, and nothing less than a full-dress campaign will tumble the walls of Jericho. The examples previously offered of the coal miners and other unions were cited to illustrate the possibilities and potentialities. They convey a totally false impression, however, if they are intended to buttress a thesis that unionism is gradually and effectively solving the race question and moving toward an integrated labor movement in the South. This is the Pollyanna message of a recent study published by the National Labor Service in cooperation with eight AFL-CIO unions, financed by the Fund for the Republic (Harry Fleischman and James Rorty, *We Open The Gates,* New York, 1958)—an attempt to make a summer out of some swallows. Such growth of unionism as there has been in the main centers of the South, and the restricted amount of Negro advancement in employment,* should give no false picture of the overall posture of Southern unionism. It is infected with the racist venom of Southern society. To the extent that it has made inroads, it has done so, by and large, by accepting, not by challenging, the mores of the Bourbons. That is not good enough. Unless and until labor squarely tackles the racial division and breaks down the barriers at least to the extent of the North, the South will continue to stand as the bastion of political reaction and the status of Southern unionism will remain shaky and equivocal. With its present attitudes, the labor movement may continue to make peripheral advances. It will not go beyond that.**

Oh, the official posture of most of the national heads is all right. They make the proper noises and go through the right motions. Some of the more advanced ones even have an *entente cordiale* with

* A 1949 statistical study of the Southeast showed in that year all white families and individuals with an income 83 percent of the national average, but Negro families and individuals with only 36 percent. These figures are of especial significance since from 1940 to 1950 Negro workers in this area declined by a third in agriculture, and increased by 30 percent in manufacturing, 55 percent in retail and wholesale trade, 74 percent in construction.

** A national CIO official who personally is strongly committed to combatting discrimination remarked on his role as an official: "Quite frankly, we aren't crusaders. We do our best to steer away from the race question whenever we can. We're in the business of organizing, not bettering race relations." (William Kornhauser, "Ideology and Interests—The Determinants of Union Actions," *Journal of Social Issues,* 1953, p. 57.)

the heads of the NAACP. In a number of unions, educational programs have been organized to try to bring the white members along on the question. What is the caviling about, then? It might appear as if criticism were purely captious. Well, the importance of all these gestures should not be overestimated. After all, a policy cannot forever justify itself on the grounds that it represents an advance over a policy of the past. It must justify itself, first of all, by how well it meets the requirements of the present. And the answer is: it doesn't meet them very satisfactorily. The cooperation between Negro and labor leaders is nominal and severely circumscribed by the conformist attitudes of both sets of bureaucracies. The union programs themselves are pedestrian propositions saturated with the liberalistic cant that is so characteristic of labor public relations.* The reaction of the union heads to the crucial events like the Birmingham bus boycott, the Washington Prayer Pilgrimage, and the scandal at Little Rock, give the true lay of the land. The pious pronouncements have been placed on record, but the unions have kept clear of actual involvement. In his current battle to break the age-old shackles in the South, the Negro, for a variety of reasons, is getting powerful support from the federal judiciary, but he cannot count on support, beyond some verbal encouragement, from the labor movement.

This is a tragic turn of events, since it means that labor is again missing the Southern bus. The crisis that broke over the South with the Supreme Court's rulings on segregation set the stage for labor's dramatic re-entry on the scene. If a new Southern drive had been mounted at that psychological moment, the old alliance between the two races that had been disrupted with malice aforethought after the breakup of the Populist movement might very well have been re-established and the Bourbon oligarchy would have probably been toppled. But social events are the products of an endless chain of prior causes and effects. And unfortunately, the labor movement of the North is not advancing, but retreating. The Southern workers are not raptly watching Northern skies blazing with the magical message

*"While organizational interests usually override ideological beliefs, positive race relations creeds often do find direct expression in formal 'educational programs' on race relations. Such programs receive major attention in most studies of union race relations. *This study, on the other hand, shows that these programs, and the creeds underlying them, occupy a marginal position in the trade union's scheme of things.*" (*Ibid*, p. 57.)

of another CIO crusade, but are regaled by a reactionary press with tales of labor racketeering. The Negro's growing self-assertiveness in the South has consequently found no friendly echo in the unions. Instead, the white opposition has become more obstreperous, and the Southern unions are on the defensive because of attacks both from within and without. The result is that labor is on the sidelines in this historic crisis. What a missed opportunity!

Legal dispensations, valuable though they are, will never alter the physiognomy of the South until a social force arises down there to push through changes in its political dispositions. And until this rampart of reaction is cracked, labor will remain impeded in any national advance. There is no attempt here to play down the difficulties. Nor is the foregoing meant to suggest that a little more bustling on the part of the union policymakers will suffice to reorganize the South. The Little Rock affair and the landslide re-election of Governor Faubus on a blatantly racist platform should dispel any illusions that any may have been cherishing on that score. There is no quickfire solution that can be put into operation by this labor movement, headed by this labor leadership, holding the posture that it does, and functioning within the political relationships that presently prevail. It is impossible to seize one link out of a complex social reality and refashion it arbitrarily. The question has to be considered from the viewpoint of what it will take to resolve the historic impasse.

The problem will respond to solution only as the labor movement begins to face up to its responsibilities *as a labor movement,* not as an assortment of individual unions following the path of least resistance and looking after their separate parochial affairs. It is not a matter of devising special techniques for a new Southern campaign, while the Northern unions persevere in their present course. It is rather a question of the national labor movement becoming a battler again for the American underdog, one of the planks of which program will necessarily include militant opposition to the discriminatory disabilities of the Negro in the South, and the elimination of the one-party regime with its accompaniment of extra-legal violence.

We are all aware that Southern white workers are at present inhospitable to such a plea. But the Northern experience has demonstrated that people can shed their prejudices, or parts of them, under pressure of necessities, and that forceful leadership when helped by

impersonal social events can re-direct viewpoints. The plain fact of the matter is that the old South of the ignorant and terrorized Negro is crumbling and that the old white leadership is in a crisis. If a new social force appeared on the scene and offered a new alternative, it could win the backing of sizeable sections of white labor. Just as unorganized workers so often need the help of their better-situated brethren to confront the employers of their own domain, so this backward region that has been polluted with racism over so many years cries aloud to the national movement to help it sweep away the debris of a century of misrule. This is in no way negated because the people of the South, like people elsewhere who need outside help in the most desperate way, are provincial to a fault and bitterly resent the intrusion of outsiders into their affairs.

It is often said that only the Southerners themselves can put through the change. This is true in the sense that it was true for the workers of the mass production industries twenty years ago. Only when they were ready to move, only when they resolved to lift the heavy burden off their backs, could a change take place in those industries. But their decision did not spring into being fully armed like Minerva from the brow of Jupiter. It was conditioned and determined by many causes, not the least important of which was the call to action by the newly created CIO. In the first days, they probably could not have survived without this brotherly succor. Even more so, the South needs the sustenance and inspiration of the national labor movement. Unionism, as Philip Murray said in 1946, is indeed a first class instrument of penetration. It can be the opening wedge of a generalized reorganization. The labor movement, however, will never succeed by bureaucratic extension but only when it becomes the carrier of a great social idea as it was in the crusading mid-thirties. As in other fields, labor will not get its stalled engine re-started until it gets itself supplied with a new set of programmatic sparkplugs.

IV

14. American Exceptionalism

The revisionist schools of Marxist writers have long recognized the special characteristics of the American labor movement, but have generally viewed them as representing a time lag. They thought that with growing economic stratification, class feelings would harden and the American pattern would resemble the European one. In the light of the events of the first half of the twentieth century, it takes no great perspicacity to understand that even these writers vastly underestimated the ability of capitalism, and especially American capitalism, to expand and hand out bigger cuts of pie. But the error goes beyond an inadequate appreciation of the powers of this particular pre-eminent capitalism. There was also an exaggeration of the socialist militancy of the European labor movements. The fact is that the modern Left movements in Western Europe, which for decades have embraced huge portions of the working peoples, appear as little prepared to challenge the existence of capitalism today as they were at the time of their formation. Beneath the more radical-appearing institutional forms, there also reside in Europe working classes trained to pressure the powers-that-be for small improvements within the existing system, and they are likewise caught in the coils of nationalism when the ruling authorities call for allegiance against the foreign foe. The watchword of the Irish used to be, "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity"; but the watchword of the European working classes has been that they are Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, and Swedes first, and socialists second.

It used to be thought in the pre-World War I days that the German Socialist Party represented the most leftward section of the Socialist International, and that the British Labor Party represented the most conservative. When the war broke out, it was discovered that although the former paid homage to Marx and Lasalle, and the latter to William Morris and the Sermon on the Mount, beneath the ideological froth the two movements possessed similar character-

istics and responded with almost identical reflexes once the nationalist war drums started to roll. There is a bit of an analogy in this concerning the relations of the West European and American movements today. The former are committed to socialism, while the latter still adheres to capitalism. But the question arises perforce whether there is not much similarity of impulse, temperament, and outlook beneath the considerable disparities in institutional forms and historical development.

There is no inclination here to wave away the more advanced status of the European movements. This is solid fact. The class consciousness of the British or French worker is by no means a fictitious thing, nor is his socialism a mere matter of conventionality and formal tradition. But capitalism has been able by a diabolical combination of benefits and sanctions, by manipulation of ancient loyalties while playing upon dangers and divisions, to drain the opposition of sustained militancy and purposeful socialist leadership. The workers are against capitalism all right, but they generally do not feel sufficiently aroused about the issue to storm the heavens. Leaders get caught up in a debilitating atmosphere. Even when they start as firebrands, they get tired in middle age of beating their heads against the seemingly impregnable establishment, and settle down as moderate reformers. Corruption of the European labor movements never assumes the barbaric American forms of trade union officials siphoning off treasuries, accepting bribes from employers, or entering into conspiracies with the underworld. But the British rulers are past masters at the game of taming their labor leaders by conferring peerages, and in the other countries techniques of envelopment have been perfected of equal efficacy. Hence, despite the different ideologies, and the gap in institutional forms and administrative practices, we find an amazing parallelism in the conduct of the two labor movements, especially since the CIO-ization of the American trade unions. In the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the Americans and Europeans quarrel over personnel arrangements and over who is to pay the bills, but they are cheek by jowl on basic perspectives and working practices. The American labor movement is exceptional still in lacking its own political organization, but the degree of exceptionality is not as immense as used to be thought or as was true in the past.

Do not let us conclude from this slow and enormously difficult evolution that the socialist goal is a chimera, and hence write off the working class as incapable of transcending the role of a pressure group within capitalist society. Three quarters of a century is longer than the life span of most individuals; it is but a moment on the scale of history. And we can hope to see the drift in reasonable perspective only by eschewing personal measuring rods. The immense labor structures that have been erected in all Western countries prove that Marx knew what he was talking about when he said that modern industry would convert the working classes into disciplined armies. Modern industry has unfortunately also stupefied the workers, limited their horizons, and numbed their ambitions.

The prognosis that the turn to socialism would begin in the industrialized West has been confounded, as has the later socialist notion that the labor movements would simply not tolerate the continuation of a system that brought on the horror of world wars. Organization, tenacity, and adaptability have been stronger elements of labor's armor than audacity and vision. Furthermore, the amount of labor internationalism that can be attained under capitalism and the existence of national states is far slighter than socialist idealism was wont to concede. Each labor movement proceeds at its own tempo, rests on its own tradition, and is moved by its own specific requirements. No two labor movements—even those of Western Europe that have similarities in their historical conditioning—are wholly alike. While an overall line of progress can be drawn in the case of the British and American labor movements, it is more difficult to derive any ascending curve from the violent oscillations of the French and German movements in the past half century, which at times rose to heights of resoluteness, and at other times sank to depths of apathy and demoralization.

But the persistence of these huge organizations of labor, which come back despite setback or defeat, whether it be the American unions' re-creation after the AFL disintegration of the twenties, or the British Labor Party's resurgence after the Ramsay MacDonald debacle of 1931, or the German movement's phoenix-like rise from the ashes of Hitler's Germany, can only be explained by the deep, subterranean urge on the part of the labor masses to protest against the inequities of an exploitative system and to aim, however clumsily

and inefficiently, for a more humane ordering of civilization. Their very tenacity over the years is an augury that there is a continuous molecular process at work which in its totality spells a recurring attempt to find a way of breaking through the confines of a system grown reactionary and destructive in its decline. Trade union leaders, especially the American, like to give the impression that the statesmanlike postures that they publicly strike are the true highlights of labor's progress and that the needs of their members have been largely solved, or at the very least, are on the way to solution. But the grey mass of workers in the background does not feel that way about labor's affairs, for despite all the gains of laborism, the alienation and brutalization of the work process has remained basically unchanged in our mass production society. It continues to goad the worker to try again and again to break out of his inferior status.

Since no one has yet discovered a new social force—although there have been many attempts to do so—which can usher the necessary, and as a matter of fact, inevitable social changes into our rudderless industrial society now gone amuck, the conviction must be retained that after sufficient trial and error, the labor movements, each in their own way and time, will rise to the historic needs of our epoch. At any rate, this is a consummation devoutly to be wished and pursued, for if labor proves incapable of playing the role of a leader in the transition to reorganize a sick society along rational lines, the alternative will not be an indefinite continuation of the present quasi-liberalistic society in the West, but either a decline of our civilization by exhaustion and destruction in war, or the historic transference of social creativeness to the East.

THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS

BY PAUL M. SWEEZY

> The effect of disarmament on employment and the national prosperity cast a deep shadow on the sixth IAM aircraft and guided missiles conference last week. As the 165 delegates were reminded, about one out of every three jobs in the United States is directly or indirectly dependent on defense spending.
>
> *Machinist,*
> publication of the
> AFL-CIO International
> Association of Machinists,
> July 4, 1957

MUCH has been written in recent years about the "American standard of living," the "income revolution," the "conquest of poverty," and the like. In this literature, American capitalism has become the workers' paradise which socialists were once scornfully derided for holding up as a vain and utopian hope to the toiling masses. How much of all this is fact and how much more or less deliberately fabricated ideology is a most complicated and difficult question which obviously cannot be answered in a few pages. And yet I think it is possible, even in very brief compass, to present enough of the answer so that the problem can be seen in its true proportions. And if I am right that clarity on this whole range of topics is a matter of the greatest importance for the American Left (in which I include the labor movement), then at any rate no apologies need be offered for making the attempt.